11th Annual Awards Issue

Computer Games

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Medal of Honor Allied Assault

Star Trek Armada II

Aquanox

Gothic

Grand Gaming

We pick the best $1000 PC

Best of 2002

The games (we think) we want to play

Make It So

Hands on with Star Trek Bridge Commander

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Suggestive Themes

PC CD ROM

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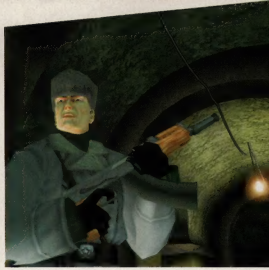

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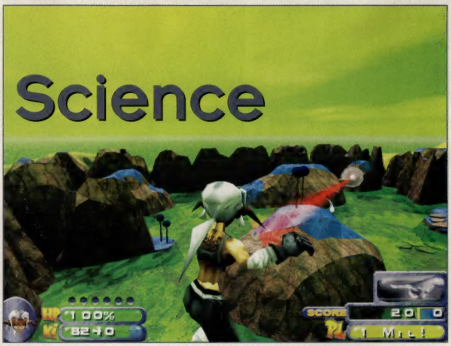
cgm • issue 136

Mod Science



What possesses a person to take an existing game and create an entirely new one? For free? We look at the beginnings of the Mod scene, the people who make them, the why and how, we highlight some special mods, and we go behind the scenes with some of the biggest in the business to get the inside story behind what, more than anything, sets PC gaming apart from consoles.

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Runeword II Rails Across America Comanche 4 Return to Castle Wolfenstein
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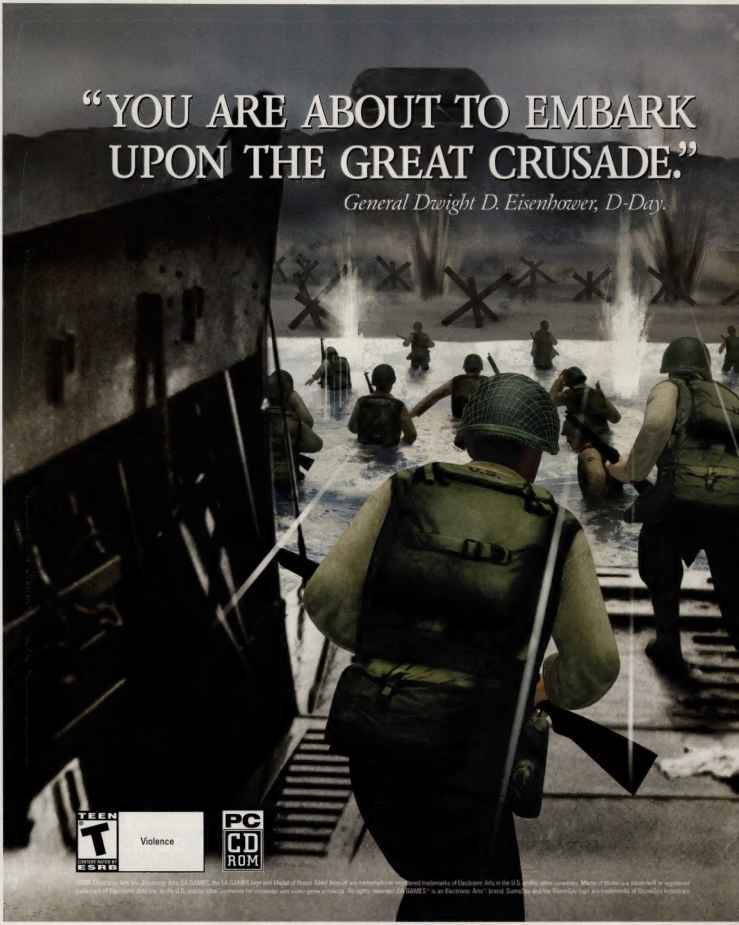

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STEVE BAUMAN

upfront

the gamer psyche

Negativity, perspective, and the state of PC gaming

Bashing the state of PC gaming, circa 2001 is the *topic de rant* on message boards throughout the world nowadays, sending a clear message to the .01% of the gaming world that regularly read message boards: you're mad as hell and you're not going to take it anymore (the message board version is usually less coherent and has more swearing).

From here in the cheap seats, 2001 was a curious year but not quite the black hole of quality pundits would make it out to be. While the absolute number of quality games per genre may shift around a bit, there were essentially the same number of award-worthy games released in 2001 as there were in 2000, which was equal to the number in 1995, and so on. Losing perspective is easy to explain: bad games fade from memory over time. You remember the brilliant games of years past, not the dreck.

So why is there a negative perception about 2001, when it's still fresh in people's minds?

One difference is that no one game stood heads and shoulders above the rest. When selecting our "Game of the Year" (see page 57), we had many discussions, both with our writers and among staff members, about the merits of games like *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns*, *Operation Flashpoint* and *Civilization III*. A lack of consensus around a single game hasn't occurred since 1994, when we had to decide between *X-COM* and *TIE Fighter*. However, the fact that such diverse games were in contention this year is noteworthy.

> So why is there a negative perception about 2001...One difference is that no one game stood heads and shoulders above the rest.

A bigger influence on the fragile gamer psyche is the sheer quantity of media. Every awful game, bug, and minor design flaw is dragged into the spotlight, and coupled with the fact it's a lot easier—and funnier—to be negative about a game makes it easy to immerse yourself in that negativity, thus altering your perception. The bad has a tendency to drown out the good.

While it's important to "keep it real" about games, there's a slippery slope of negativity that's easy to fall into. It starts a little something like this:

Once we were all excited about every game coming out down the proverbial road, and waxed poetical about how certain games would rock our proverbial world.

Then reality set in: the games shipped and we found out they cheated us out of the thing we desired most from our games, that transcendent, escapist level of entertainment.

After a few disappointments, we went into our next game purchase hoping we wouldn't get screwed; if we lowered our expectations, we wouldn't be disappointed. But we were.

Then we got cynical, realizing the game industry is making money turning out crap. As long as people, those great masses of people too stupid to know otherwise, pay for it, there is little to motivate the companies to change. Until there's a massive revolt on the part of gamers throughout the world, we can expect more pretty graphics and a shortage of gameplay, more emulation then originality.

And so on, and so on.

After checking out our awards, see for yourself whether you think 2001 was an awesome, average, or awful year for PC gaming. From my own perspective, I played a ton of games this year, some great, some good, some not-so-good. It wasn't an awesome year and it wasn't an awful year, which puts it squarely in the middle, the place it's always been.

But clearly, this hasn't been a normal year. Many of the PC faithful turned their backs—websites that previously only covered PC gaming allowed console coverage to dominate. PC gaming was marginalized, just as it was in the mid-90s, the year (or so) of the introductions of the PlayStation, Saturn, and Nintendo 64. A year or so later, it came back stronger than ever, as it's primed to do in 2002.

Depending on your perspective, of course.

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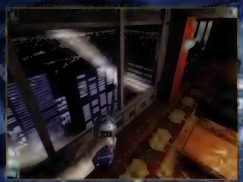
A million bad guys in the world and I gotta



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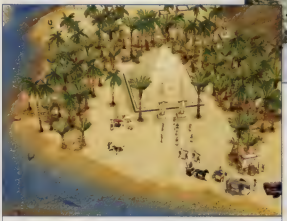
See you in September

Bruce Shelley spins the delay of Age of Mythology

by Cindy Yans



Epic battles like this will take place late in 2002. >>> The Egyptians throw a beach party. >>> Bruce Shelley

On December 17th, Ensemble Studios announced that after missing its ambitiously planned Holiday 2001 release of *Age of Mythology*, it now plans to abandon its supposed, but still too ambitious, Spring 2002 release. The game is now scheduled for September.

Given the success of Ensemble's previous Age titles, Ensemble helmsman Bruce Shelley has neither qualms nor apologies at this turn of events. In fact, he is even a bit cavalier about the news. "I always thought 'Spring Title' was somebody else's idea," he shrugs.

And so *Age of Mythology* makes a stand in the grand tradition of so many highly anticipated titles—it'll be done when it's done. "When we got closer to being done, we could more accurately predict when we *would* be done," says Shelley, "and I think we feel pretty good where we are today. We're close to having a beta version done. And based on our experience in the past, I think September is a much more reasonable date."

Of course since they're about to have a full feature set on the podium any time now, it's apparent that the AI tweaking and play balancing will be what the team will work on most of this year. With the very proficient real-time strategy component in their previous titles, they've laid a lot of the groundwork for this one, the most notable difference being implementation of the game's "God Powers" and the inclusion of mythological creatures.

"There are different types of God Powers," explains Shelley. Some are more economically oriented and help you with your resource gathering. Some are more strategic and some are tactical, so, we've been working with those, and that's going to take a lot of balancing—beyond the normal balancing of a typical real-time strategy game. There's this overlay, not only of these God Powers, but then the mythological creatures each have unique properties and do special things... There's just a whole new level of decision making going on, and we just want to make sure it works."

You have to wonder, though, how hard the principals laugh upon seeing original production schedules. If fans took it all as lightly, there would be a lot less to complain about. But even Shelley is not as cavalier as that. He says, "Well, you know...I think that at some point you have to be accountable." And that's good to know. ●

IT'S NOT JUST MEDIEVAL...

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

Denis Papp
Lead Engineer
TimeGate Studios

On the PC, I've been playing *Aliens vs Predator 2*, *Max Payne*, *Counterstrike*, and a lot of our own *Kohan*. Plus, I always go back to *NetHack*. On the PS2, I've been playing *Devil May Cry* and *NHL 2002*.

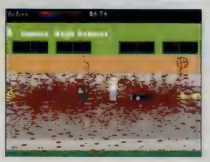
Todd Pratt
Catcher, Philadelphia Phillies

My first online MMORPG was *Ultima Online*. I was a freak playing it. *EverQuest* came along and I jumped on the Sony train. But I will have to say that *EverQuest* has taken a backseat right now. I am currently playing *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Ultima Online*, and *EverQuest*. As I write this though, *Shadows of Luclin* has just gone live, so, *EverQuest* will now get more of my playing hours.

Todd Howard
Project Leader
Bethesda Softworks

I'm embarrassed to report that I was forced to buy a PS2 so I could play *NCAA 2002*, which is hands-down the best sports game I have ever played. *Grand Theft Auto 3* is also pure evil fun. I hadn't touched my PC in weeks and I felt like a cheating husband, so I got *Civilization III*, and now I remember why I didn't do better in college.

SPOTLIGHT



Zombie Smashers X
Totally Screwed Software
[www.totallyscrewedsoftware.com]

Zombie Smashers X provides more evidence you can improve every game by adding zombies. According to its maker, it's a game with "more violence than most things people consider violent." In reality, it's kind of like the old SNES game *River City Ransom*, done *"…of the Dead"* style. But that doesn't really get to the heart of this little wonder, as it's a lot dumber, more violent, and, what's that word?, fun. It might even be excellent. It's a wonderful mix of the nauseatingly cute and the nauseatingly violent. It has great sound (borrowed from *Half-Life*, apparently), it can be modded (registered version only… the guy has to eat), there are actual physics (who knew you could throw a zombie corpse at a zombie and have it bounce of him and take out another zombie… it's physics, man!), and lots of zombies. And ninjas. You buy tattoos to get new moves (it has role-playing elements), eat CDs to improve your stats… yeah, it's weird. Despite looking like *South Park… of the Dead*, it actually uses Direct3D for some effects. Bravo! Support bizarre gaming like this with your $10.

TOP SELLERS

1	THE SIMS: HOT DATE	Electronic Arts
2	HARRY POTTER & THE SORCERER'S STONE	Electronic Arts
3	THE SIMS	Electronic Arts
4	BACKYARD BASKETBALL	Infogrames
5	ROLLER COASTER TYCOON	Infogrames
6	CIVILIZATION III	Infogrames
7	ZOO TYCOON	Microsoft
8	BACKYARD FOOTBALL 2002	Infogrames
9	BOB THE BUILDER: CAN WE FIX IT	THQ
10	SURVIVOR: THE INTERACTIVE GAME	Infogrames

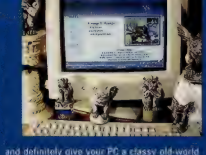
11. Return to Castle Wolfenstein (Activision); 12. The Sims: House Party (Electronic Arts); 13. The Sims: Livin' Large (Electronic Arts); 14. Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon (UbiSoft); 15. Empire Earth (Sierra); 16. Roller Coaster Tycoon Loopy Landscapes (Infogrames); 17. Sim Theme Park (Electronic Arts); 18. Backyard Baseball 2001 (Infogrames); 19. Diablo II Expension Set: Lord of Destruction (Blizzard); 20. Thomas Playset (THQ)

Source: NPD INTELECT® Market Tracking. The December list is based on units sold by forty-two retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

OFFBEAT

Gargoyles
Publisher: T. Scott Designs
URL: www.compugarg.com

T. Scott Designs offers modern computer users the same protection builders of medieval cathedrals chose for their security needs: gargoyles. Comp-U-Gargs are exacting reproductions of original sculptures by Tim Chrisco, and generally cost around $15-20. The company makes no claims itself, but does cite its customers as affirming the protective qualities of the gargoyles and their efficacy in protecting computers from all manner of modern-day threats. Even if the Comp-U-Gargs don't actually work as virus scanners—we'd recommend a more traditional approach ourselves—they sure look nifty,



and definitely give your PC a classy old-world sort of look.

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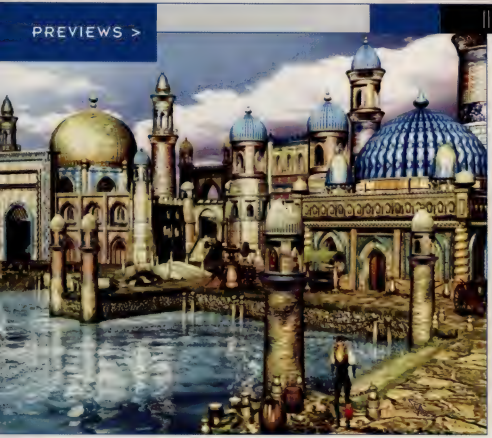


Comrades in charms

Soviet standby 1C lifts the iron curtain on Jazz & Faust

by Scott Steinberg

Glastnost may be well past its shelf date, but a heartfelt passion for gaming is still one cross-cultural message of goodwill that hails from Russia with love. Proof lies in the form of ex-Iron Curtain publishing stalwart The 1C Company, whose Maddox Games brought domestic audiences the award-winning *IL-2 Sturmovik* [*see page 54*] last holiday season.

Now, flush with newfound—and admittedly unforeseen—success, the intrepid masters of those who dared breathe life into the nigh-dead simulation genre will, through developer Saturn+, lay their healing hands upon yet another endangered species; specifically, point and click adventures. Introducing *Jazz & Faust*, a possibly enchanting, certainly technologically daring jaunt down memory lane that could have *King's Quest* junkies whistlin' Dixie for a time, even if it's just a temporary reprieve from Taps, their usual tune these days.

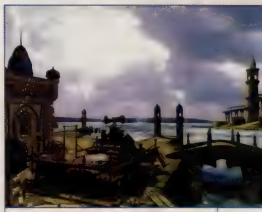
Anchors aweigh

As typical of its forefathers, the game opens amidst an atmosphere of confusion and whimsy. You must choose between two characters, neither of which have the slightest clue what fate soon has in store for them. Jazz is a greedy smuggler that sports a dashing mullet, and who, coincidentally, looks absolutely smashing in leggings. Hey, it's all about the fashion statements with this one. Faust serves as his foil, being a stalwart, honest, much snappier dressed mountain of a man that captains a ship for hire. Because the former begins play imprisoned within a jail cell and the latter under investigation for murder, neither is aware of the other until their paths collide much later, creating a unique experience no matter whom you choose. Curiously, such plot devices enable varying NPC appearances, obvious situational differences and a myriad of mindbenders, even though both parties visit identical locations. Call it a matter of perspective, if you will, because it's an apt, if groan-inducing, double entendre.

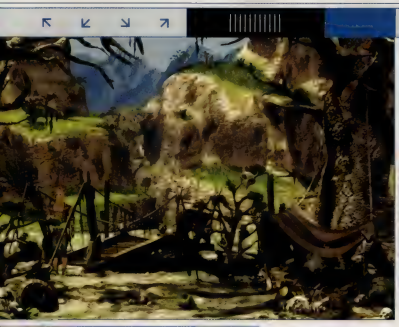
Separate or together, depending on the timing, Jazz and Faust are forced to explore the Ancient East. Encounters with bumbling policemen, mysterious women, and shady underworld types precede an epic race for wealth beyond reckoning. Like any captivating oceanbound tale, the story features unimaginable magic, fearsome villains and a ne'er do well protagonist or two that perservere as much by way of dumb luck as by cunning or intellect. Despite humorous instances, namely conversations with more than 50 NPCs that include rat-training prisoners and drunken old men, you'll find it a fairly serious outing. While occasional bits of the linear dialogue are laced with comedy, Saturn+ has instead opted for a mature approach to storytelling. Players who seemingly spot *Arabian Nights* parallels during gameplay won't be amiss, given the title is obviously influenced by Shaharazad's epic yarn. However, Sinbad and Ali Baba these chumps aren't, with individual endings tailored for each character the only riches steadfast adventurers are liable to attain via their assistance.

Form *and* function

Furthermore, over 80 hand-drawn scenes host more puzzles than grizzled sea dogs can shake a harpoon at. The vast majority are constructed from mundane item collection and retrieval routines, though stereotypically goofy objects like smuggled gin, sleeping potions and a snake charmer's pipe always liven things up. Utilizing a command prompt turned morphable cursor, you can explore nearby surroundings, searching for useful doodads. When waved over interesting rubbish or a local yokel, it changes into a spyglass, hand or dragon icon, depending on whether the hotspot in question bears examination, acquisition, or interaction. Mercifully, right-clicking brings up a simple two-click interface for object usage, and won't require inter-item manipulation, as in titles such as *Escape from Monkey Island* which demand you fashion makeshift, and oftentimes inscrutable, goods. In essence, adventure fans won't find anything here but good old-fashioned conundrums like Roberta Williams & co. used to make. Showing off grapefruit-sized cojones, *Jazz & Faust* bucks current trends, opting



The Casbah, I presume? >>> Glorious oceanside scenes are a staple here. All that's missing are the beachfront condos.



[left to right] Rest easy, Tarzan, your legacy is safe with Faust. >>> "I'll take three babies and a kilo of cocaine, please." Jazz converses with one of the shadier NPCs.

Next stop, Little Havana! Towns sport a distinct decor depending on your current location.

instead for a classic bent on mindbending that eschews obscure references, reflex intensive sequences, and *Monkey Kombat* minigames. After all, rumor has it people used to like their computerized nemeses simply crafted, yet notoriously challenging. *Tetris*, anyone?

Walking similarly defined lines, plot twists won't leave casual users in the lurch. Brainbusters neither defy logic nor beat frontal lobes senseless. Because story paths are linear, not branching, you should never find yourself lacking a next move. Areas open as needed, and you'll have at your disposal a spacious playroom for piecing various puzzles together, so there needn't be any worries over excess handholding. Rather, if all goes well, the system will let you focus on the immediate task(s) at hand, thankfully doing away with the endless backtracking which plagues less readily polished designs. Solving a riddle once is not the comprehensive answer. Come the other character's turn, the rules of the game will have completely changed, figuratively speaking. Put bluntly, the developers will happily lead closet braniacs to water... whether they'll find the means to gulp it down, continue onward, and eventually grow thirsty again is another story.

The colors, the colors...

Natural gray matter appeal notwithstanding, the bulk of this particular product's charisma is directly attributable to its technical performance. Tipping the hat to *The Longest Journey* and *Grim Fandango*, graphical assets are strictly 3D as characters go, yet environments fall into the 2D realm. Presumably you won't care, once a fantastic medieval aesthetic makes its presence known. Once complete, the experience of watching fully animated turkeys prance atop quaint little brick roads or ships sway in the Middle Ages-influenced harbor at the city of Er-Elp is liable to take your breath away. Additional scenes should be no less enthralling, employing subtle lighting contrasts to paint cheerful (though sometimes foreboding) panoramas of flora, fauna, and man-made architecture that rival scenes from a world traveler's wildest dreams. The game will take you through three unique worlds, including a rugged desert where life is harsh and the inhabitants harsher, a coastal land teeming with seafaring cutthroats rabid for plunder, and a merchant trade route that countless mercenaries, heroes, and ruffians call home. Scenes practically burst with imaginative pizzaz, recalling many a bedtime story.

While the game's overall visuals are outstanding, most surprises lie in the smaller details. Hardware acceleration enables a number of special effects previously unrecognized by close competitors, like volumetric fog, plasma-esque flames, wispy smoke trails, and fleeting water showers. Pay close attention and you'll also notice not so subtle changes, such as creatures that exist as mere flying pests during daylight hours, but become brightly lit fireflies when night falls. And there are more surprises still for the intrepid heroes who brave a quest that spans famously textured Asian, European, and Middle Eastern inspired surroundings. To demand such overt nuances from an action game is understable; asking them of a static adventure is almost unheard of. If Saturn + has its way, lithe touches such as these may very well enrich every scene, regardless of how pretty the backdrops are to begin with. Although playing in software-rendered mode somewhat minimizes the ambiance, the mood will likely carry across brilliantly nonetheless, PC visual capabilities aside. And luckily for end-users that aren't pushing major horsepower, just about any graphical feature can be switched off as desktop limitations demand.

Still, if you have the get-up-and-go, you'll want to crank this puppy way past maximum overdrive and jump in headfirst. *Jazz & Faust* is a fascinating haul through dreamland that begs, nay demands, a killer system, with the potential payoff for your time and money being a trip through one of the most ambitious adventure games seen in years. What's more, this is the first title 1C will publish in America under its own banner, with the ubiquitous promise of additional goodies down the road. Therefore, consider a glance well worth your precious time, for both entertainment value and philanthropic reasons; and plunk a wad of cash down when the title drops in Q2 2002—or be cautious and wait for the review. If *Jazz & Faust* realizes the potential it shows this early in development, you won't just be acquiring what promises to be the hottest interactive fantasy since *Virtual Valerie*, but a renaissance game that may pave the way for more swashbuckling shenanigans to come. ●

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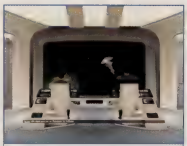
Star Trek Bridge Commander puts you in the center seat

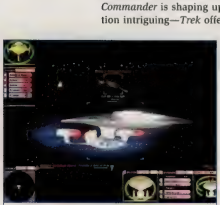
by Robert Mayer



The view from the bridge: get used to it.

There was a time, not long ago, when the words "Star Trek" and "PC game" usually meant "dung pile" in reality speak. No longer. The last few *Trek* titles have more than carried their own weight, and the future still looks bright if Totally Games' next project continues along its current path. *Star Trek Bridge Commander* is shaping up to be one of the more innovative—not to mention intriguing—*Trek* offerings ever.

Larry Holland's Totally Games is best known for its *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* space sims for LucasArts, but *Bridge Commander* is a radically different beast. Joystick jockeys need not apply. You're commanding a capital ship, not a fighter, and "command" is the operative word. You control your vessel by giving orders to your subordinates, or by letting them take charge of their particular areas of expertise. Your job is to direct and make decisions; the actual mechanics of piloting and fighting a starship aren't your concern, though in a pinch you can take over manual targeting.



The tactical view gives you a good look at the action.

While in concept this sort of "hands off" approach might sound a bit dull, in practice it's anything but. The interface is streamlined, attractive, and effective. You view the bridge from a first-person perspective, and to give orders you merely center a crewmember in your vision and click the left mouse button. That calls up a nicely organized selection of menus and information displays, allowing you to order anything within that crewmember's purview. You can also take manual control of many ship's functions, and use keyboard shortcuts as well. Most of the time, though, your main contribution is as the brains of the operation, not its hands.

Visually, the game is striking, with a very faithful *Next Generation* look to the interface details. Pretty much everything is mouse driven; as you might expect, this is a control scheme that the touch-panel interface of "real" Federation ships in the Next Generation era makes particularly appealing. The ships themselves are quite beautiful, and the weapons effects are also very good looking.

The single-player game involves a series of mostly linear missions. The game autosaves at intervals, generally at the beginning of a mission, and at least for some missions, you have to win or it's game over. You can also use the "simulator" to play quick battles, and these skirmishes are great fun, and a wonderful way to bone up on starship tactics in a safe environment. And of course there's multiplayer, with death match, team death match, Federation vs. non-Federation death match, and a "defend the starbase" mode as well.

Combat is surprisingly tense and exciting, given that you don't generally do that much in terms of controlling your ship. You pick the targets, or just let your tac officer do it, and then sit back and monitor things. Like a real captain, you have to rely on your crew to get the job done. You can have your engineering officer shift power between shields, weapons, and engines, and you can prioritize damage control, among other things. You can try some fancy maneuvering, too, but one on one or two on one combats don't allow for that much in the way of superlative tactics. Still, it's amazingly fun and there are usually many nail-biting moments as you pull for your shields to recharge before the enemy's torpedoes hit.

The most impressive aspect of *Bridge Commander*, though, isn't the combat as much as it is the overall game design. This is "realistic" starship command done right—and it's most likely the closest you'll ever get to commanding a *Galaxy*-class Federation starship, unless some helpful aliens build one for you. ●

Zombies in the Food Court

Retail goes Holistic with Mall Tycoon

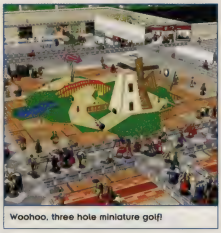
by Cindy Yans

Take-Two Interactive and Holistic Design Studios have finally realized a concept that many of us are amazed had been missing for so long. The mall environment seems an obvious choice for a *Tycoon*-type strategy game, and one will be on its way to us early this year. In *Mall Tycoon*, you'll be able to design, build, and run your retail emporium of choice.

The idea here is to build an environment that will flourish or perish, attracting the well-doers and the ne'er-do-wells with an "arsenal" of over 250 stores and 120 scenery pieces. If you want to keep the joint in order and are going for profitability, you'll want to hire maintenance personnel, armed guards, and greeters (like the somewhat frightening smiling seniors that greet you at Wal*Mart), and maybe install surveillance equipment and metal detectors. If you aren't careful, harmful elements may slip in, such as shoplifters, mall punks, and supernatural creatures. Zombies in the Food Court—shame on you.

Perhaps a little too much Independence Day?

You can either start with property only, building your 3D mall from scratch, or indulge in any of a wide variety of mall scenarios. What is a mall scenario? "Kid spills ice cream" and "Riot in the tuxedo rental store" come to mind. The game will feature a 360-degree rotating camera and multiple zoom levels, and over 60 products and services.



Woohoo, three hole miniature golf!

You'll be able to manage the structure's physical design, number of levels, and add attractions such as roller coasters, Santa Claus' throne, or the juggling optometrist. You can also hold events like fashion shows, rock concerts, and decoupage tournaments. Research new-hires, upgrades, and new marketing strategies to increase the popularity and efficiency of your mall, or let it sink into the toilet. It's up to you. ●

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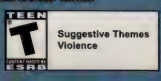

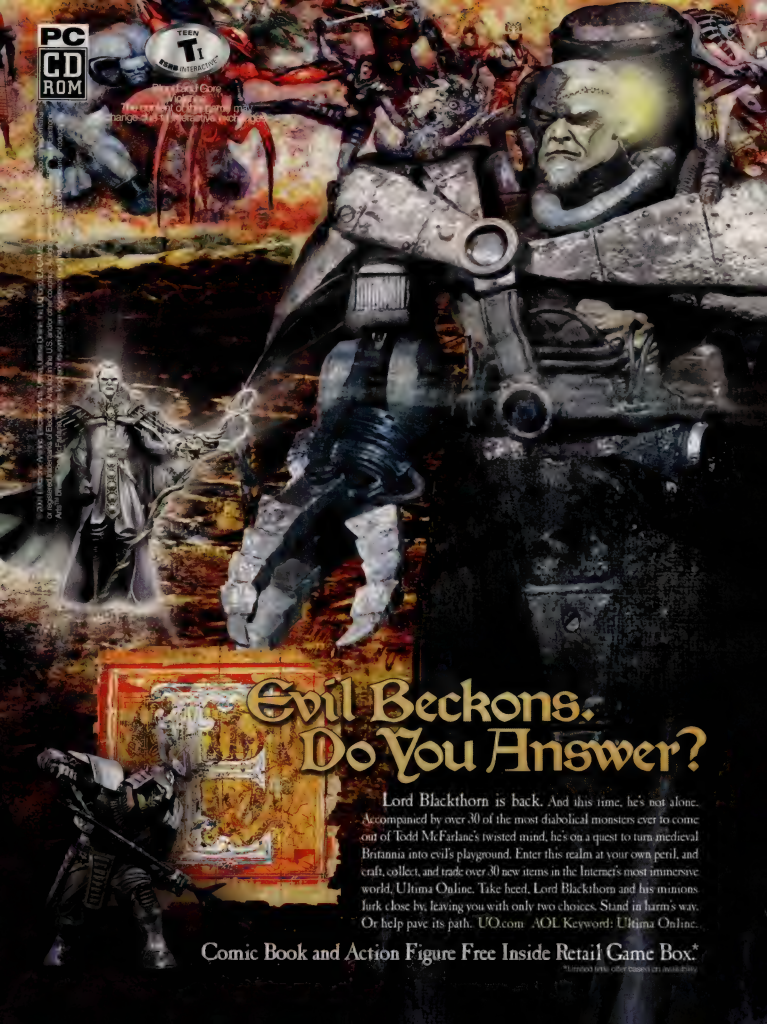
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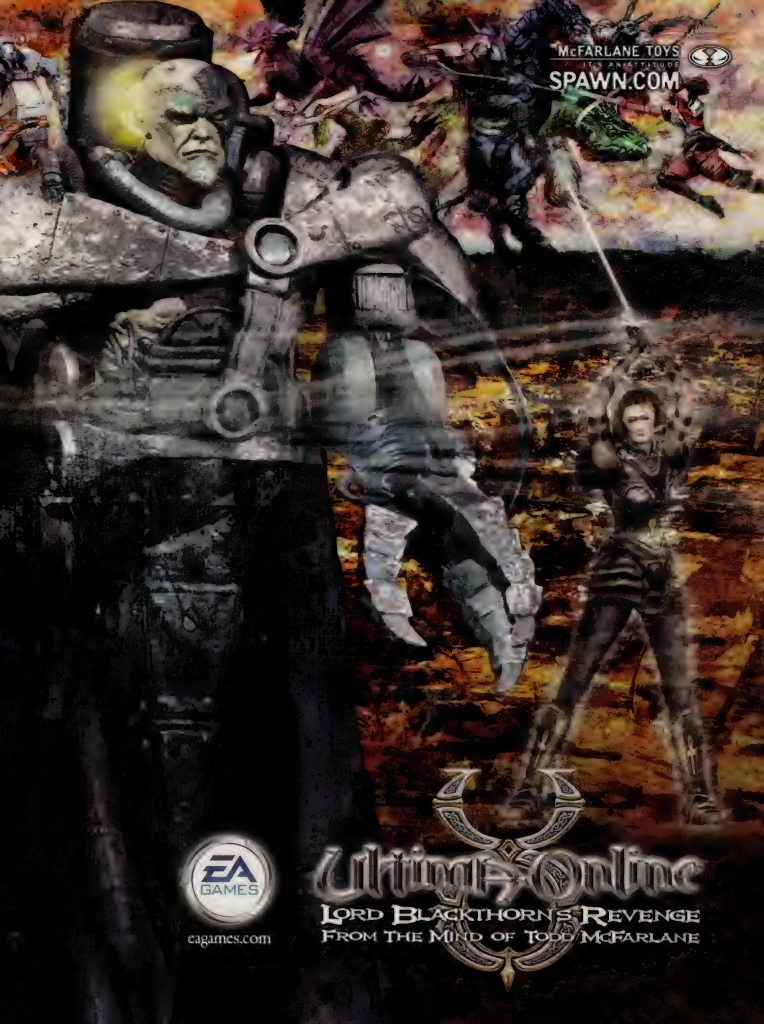
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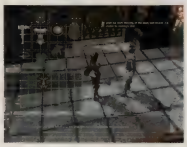
MOD SCIENCE

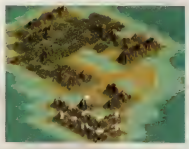
Inside the underground world of game making

by Caryn Law with additional reporting by Robert Mayer and Brett Todd

As with ancient artifacts and legendary tales, the origins of the modern game modification, or "mod," are lost in the annals of gaming history. Some say that the first mod was made for id Software's landmark shooter, DOOM. Others say that it goes back farther than that, into levels created for pre-DOOM games such as Wolfenstein 3D. Those who followed the scene back in those days, when pressed to recall, usually remember a friend or, like an urban legend, a friend of a friend hacking into some favorite game and changing a game rule here or a weapon there and then releasing it for others to play.

It's not aging gamers' failing memories that shroud the origin of the mod in obscurity. Tinkering with games and changing them around has been a time-honored tradition that's existed since the computer game itself, even as far back as the text-only days of the original Zork. But the tinkering has become increasingly sophisticated over the years, and today the mod is a cottage industry, inviting both developers and gamers to take notice. Think of the mod scene as a kind of frontier with its own explorers and history makers, with their own stories on why they decided to brave this unknown territory and how they are changing the face of the game industry. . .





Illustrations by Benjamin E. Sones

Though not technically mod-able, BioWare's Neverwinter Nights is being designed so gamers can create their own worlds and adventures.

The Mod Spectrum

Back in the days of *Quake*, the definition of a mod was pretty cut and dried: if it altered the gameplay or drastically changed most of the fundamental content—models and skins, for instance—it was a mod. *Capture the Flag* and *Team Fortress* were the two most popular and influential mods in the early scene, radically changing the gameplay mechanics of *Quake*. They were so influential that CTF has since become a standard mode of play included in most team-based titles shipping today, and *Team Fortress* has spawned clones in a multitude of engines as Valve Software (the evolution of the original mod team) purportedly works on a full-fledged sequel, *Team Fortress 2*.

As the mod scene evolved, the definition has become a little blurrier and has since grown to encompass different types of extended content. These days, the line between a full game and a mod can sometimes be hard to see. It can be easier to picture the range of user-created content as a kind of spectrum, with each color, or type of content, blurring into its neighbors.

At the left end of the add-on spectrum—where the simplest type of user-made stuff sits—are levels and missions. Since the days of *DOOM* (and possibly earlier), users have created their own levels and maps to play with their friends. Skins and models also fall into this range, as they're often bite-sized pieces of add-on content—a new character to play, a new level to play, or a new skin for an existing character.

Gathering several of these levels into a coherent package can, depending on the game, create what's generally called a "mission." They're not quite mods since they don't change the gameplay, but

First-Person Shooters Science

Day of Defeat (Half-Life)

As modding really got started with *Quake*, it should come as no surprise to see that first-person shooters still dominate the mod world. Here are some of the must-have mods for the most popular shooters out there:

Day of Defeat (Half-Life): Set during the Second World War, this *Half-Life* mod lets you join up with the Allies or the Axis for team-based street battles. Four distinct classes on each team provide a lot of gameplay depth, allowing for different styles of play dictated by your chosen role. A sniper, for example, is best at skulking around and registering kills from a distance, while a an assault infantryman is best at close-quarters combat. Get into a game with good players and the fighting is so realistic that you'll almost be able to smell the cordite. A total of 13 weapons from WWII are available, including a Hitler Youth knife. The 10 maps that come with *Day of Defeat* are based on authentic theaters of battle, though of course with some artistic license. At present, this is a multiplayer-only mod, though the developers are promising a single-player mode soon. *www.dayofdefeatmod.com*

The Opera (Half-Life): Imagine *Max Payne* multiplayer (although this mod preceded *Max* by quite a few months and omits the whole "bullet time" thing) and you have an idea what Redeemed Soft pulls off with this terrific mod. Inspired by John Woo movies ("Blood operas," as some call them) and anime, it's playable either in first- or third-person, though the latter allows you to see all of the various cool moves your trenchcoat wearing characters can pull off. You can fire while diving, rolling, or flipping, a few of the levels are terrific, and you can play co-op "Mook matches" against many heavily armed bad guys. *opera.redeemedsoft.com*

Seriously Warped (Serious Sam: The First Encounter): *Seriously Warped* enhances deathmatch play in *Serious Sam: The First Encounter* with three new games. Serious Control Zone is a bit like *Capture the Flag* in that you must hold ground near a flag to earn points. Serious Objective Thief makes you search for an item and return it to a recovery zone. And Serious (hmmm, there's a trend here...) Rugby is identical to the above, except that you earn points simply by running around with the target object. A new version of will be included in *Serious Sam: The*

instead add new arenas to play on with maybe a tangential storyline in the game's universe tying all of the levels together. Some games, like Looking Glass Studios' *Thief* and *Thief 2*, have a huge base of fan-created missions available on the web, giving players innumerable hours of extended play in an older game. The role-playing genre is finding its niche in this part of the spectrum, with upcoming games like *Neverwinter Nights* encouraging players to create their own game worlds for new adventures.

Sitting in the middle of our spectrum is the mod itself. Unlike levels or missions, in which the gameplay remains the same but the scenery changes, mods are the result of fans tinkering with the actual code for the game, tweaking gameplay mechanics, changing the core premise, or otherwise significantly altering the base game. For example, a mod can turn a straight-up team play deathmatch game into a *Capture the Flag* mod with the right code changes. This isn't the strict definition of a mod, however; mods can also simply change the look of the game, though it has to be a pretty big change to be considered a mod. Taking *Quake III Arena*, for instance, and changing everything to look like the *Star Wars* universe could be a *Star Wars* mod, but ask most hardcore fans of the scene and they'll tell you that a mod at least requires some code changes. The line between levels, skins, and missions and that of mods is blurred—gather up enough new levels, new models, and new skins into one vast theme and the result is sometimes indistinguishable from a mod.

Take it even farther and you have what's known as the "total conversion," sitting at the far right in our hypothetical spectrum. While a mod might change the gameplay and leave the look of the game intact, a total conversion changes everything (for a good example, see *Urban Terror*). The only thing left untouched in a total conversion is the engine itself, which usually requires a license to modify and hence is untouchable for most mod authors. The only step past a total conversion is a fully original game, either with a licensed engine or an originally developed one.

The Mod Squad

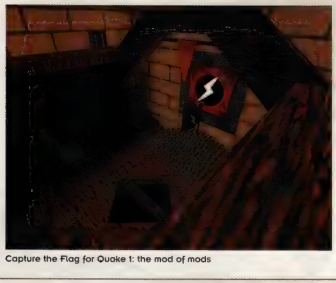
A mod can be a simple change of a game's code so that, for example, killing your opponent with the lowly pistol gets you a lot more points than doing it with the powerful and easy rocket launcher. But mods aren't limited to such simple changes, and these days, more often than not, they are far more profound projects. Gone (mostly) are the days when a mod is created by a single gamer with some knowledge of the C programming language, killing some time on a weekend afternoon. These days, many mods are created by teams of people formed exactly like a professional development company with specialized skills in level design, model creation, or programming, and complete with PR managers and

Second Encounter, that should be in stores by the time you can read this. *www.3dactionplanet.com/serioussam/warped*

Tactical Ops (Unreal Tournament): *Unreal Tournament* has its very own realistic counter-terrorism mod in *Tactical Ops*. Similar to the *Counterstrike*, *Day of Defeat*, and *Urban Terror* mods, *Tactical Ops* is set up like an action movie with real-world environments. Players are divided into teams of special forces and terrorists and given genuine weapons to use against one another. Money awarded for winning each "round" is used to upgrade equipment. Objectives include standard hostage-rescue scenarios and more interesting missions such as stealing weapon prototypes. Maps are based on real-world locations. *www.tactical-ops.to*

Urban Terror

Urban Terror (Quake III Arena): It might not have the most politically correct of names in these troubled times, but the *Urban Terror* mod for *Quake III Arena* is a runaway hit with shooter fans. Silicon Ice Development's team-based total conversion adds a touch of realism to id Software's patented mayhem. Eleven authentic weapons from manufacturers like Heckler and Koch and Beretta, equipment such as a laser sight and a kevlar vest, military player skins, and 15 new maps featuring realistic settings make this the ultimate *Quake III Arena* mod at the moment. *www.urbanterror.net*



Capture the Flag for Quake 1: the mod of mods

project coordinators. These groups have names like Team Evolve, Threewave, and TeamBG, and none of them are amateurs. Team Evolve has been producing mods and add-ons for first-person shooters since the original *Quake* days, and David "Zoid" Kirsch of Threewave created the landmark *Capture the Flag* mod for the same game. But while they may not be amateurs, they all cut their teeth making mods for their favorite games.

It's one thing to throw yourself full force into a project that you're getting paid for, but mod authors are a unique breed—they do it for the sole reward of adulation. Robert Waring, formerly of Team Evolve and now owner of his own 3D entertainment company, Waring Entertainment, believes that payoff is worth it. "We do it for stress release, for fun, and we do what we can to provide a stellar gaming experience to others," he says. "That's our payoff. Knowing we've made people smile and say, 'Wow!'"

There are more rewards to reap from making mods than just a fan base, however. There's probably nothing more valuable than hands-on experience if you're trying to get a job as a

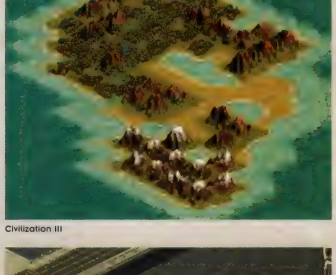
Strategy Science

Strategy is another genre that lends itself naturally to modification. Even early on, just as much fun as presenting a "really cool level" in an action game is presenting a "really cool map" or scenario.

Civilization III: The game we tapped as "Best of 2001" has a lively mod community of its own. This isn't surprising, as Firaxis includes a powerful editor with the game and graphic and other surface tweaks are also fairly simple. The best single source for mods is the Apolyton *Civilization* Site, where you'll find everything from a completely revised rules set for the Ancient governments in the game, to minor oddities like Pierre Trudeau's head for use with a custom-created Canadian civilization. Most mods simply alter the game's look, adding resource labels or changing the appearance of units, but some offer real-world maps and even rules changes. *apolyton.net/civ3*

Eagle Red (Red Alert 2): The burgeoning *Red Alert 2* mod community is best represented by *Eagle Red*. Work on this extensive modification has been ongoing for over a year now, with the six-man design team constantly working on improvements. In the current 1.5 version, there are nine new game modes, 37 new units, 18 new buildings, and a host of tweaks to the existing game. As of press time, the developers were proceeding with a new version to add support for the *Yuri's Revenge* expansion pack. *www.planetcnc.com/ra2mod, www.planetcnc.com/eaglered*

World Domination (Total Annihilation): *Total Annihilation* may be getting up there, but it's still one of the more popular real-time strategy titles on the market. There are a lot of good mods for it, though the single must-have is *World Domination*. This total conversion changes the default campaign into a futuristic World War III scenario where NATO must face off against the Moskva Pact. Mission design is ongoing, but many units have already been converted to real-world counterparts, giving the game an authentic military feel. *www.tadesigners.com*



Civilization III

Eagle Red

LucasArts Entertainment Company Presents

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RAVEN SOFTWARE

TEEN

LucasArts

Q3F for Quake III Arena

game developer, and that's exactly what these guys get whenever they create a mod, level, model, or skin. Many game developers today got their start by creating mods or levels for their favorite game, using the experience as a solid resume. By organizing themselves into development groups like Team Evolve, mod developers can work as a team to produce high-quality mods that show they have experience working with others to create and release a polished, finished product.

"Going from a mod team to a commercial gaming job is a big and logical step," Waring says. "People from Team Evolve have left over the last few years to work on such titles as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *World Series Baseball 2K2*, and companies like Legend Entertainment and ION Storm. Starting your career in a mod group is definitely a good resume builder."

Working on a mod also gives many armchair game designers the chance to put their money where their mouth is. The mod community has always been comprised of hardcore gamers, and the hardcore crowd has never been particularly shy about telling developers how

Role-playing Science

If any genre *doesn't* need modding, it's role-playing. With the average swords and sorcery epic clocking in at around a hundred hours of play, it's hard to imagine anyone reaching the end of one of these games and asking, "Is that it?" Still, there are a couple of role-playing mods out there from Team BG for the *Baldur's Gate* games that will practically drag you back for more...

Dark Side of the Sword Coast [Baldur's Gate]: This unofficial add-on for *Baldur's Gate* and the official *Tales of the Sword Coast* expansion pack added almost as much to the original as that expansion pack. In addition to enhancing many of the quests and encounters in BioWare's original game, Team BG introduced five new major quests, eight new NPCs with new art, more than 80 new weapons, 100 new spells, and over 70 new monsters. All of this was incorporated in a professional, seamless fashion that made it virtually impossible to tell the difference between what was developed by BioWare and what was developed by Team BG. Fans embraced the expansion so heartily that translations were soon made into German and Japanese. *www.dsotsc.com*

The Darkest Day [Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn]: This adds more than 30 hours of gameplay thanks to the presence of more than 40 minor and five major quests, and a "mega" quest objective to rival the Watcher's Keep scenario in the official *Throne of Bhaal* expansion pack. Ten new and returning NPCs, more than 180 new items, over 170 new spells, some 39 new monsters, and 75 new player character kits round out the features. Those without high-speed Internet access can arrange for mail delivery of this 266MB mod. *teambg.dbforge.com/net/tdd*

Dark Side of the Sword Coast

The Darkest Day

DWARVES WITH ATTITUDE

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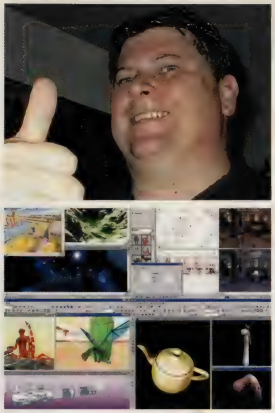
TEEN T ESRB

Blood
Comic Mischief
Mild Violence



Robert E. Waring, Team Evolve mod maker. His take on mods? "The-e-e-ey're great!" >>> Crateam encouraged the development of a mod community by creating easy-to-use tools for its first-person shooter Serious Sam and releasing them right away.

they should make their games. By producing their own mod, they get the chance to prove their mettle, to see if they have what it takes to give gamers what they think they want. Often they succeed. Creators of the *Front Line Force* mod for *Half-Life* carefully analyzed what it was they felt wasn't working in certain popular online games and then implemented carefully thought-out mechanisms to overcome the problems and fitting them within their ultimate goal, which was to get players to truly work together as a team. *Front Line Force* has since become one of the most popular *Half-Life* modifications next to *Counter-strike*.

Ultimately, Waring says it's about the freedom to create the game you've always wanted to play. "I don't have a marketing department with a hundred weasels telling me what's going to be hot; we make what we like to play."

Just as there are pitfalls in the professional world, there are pitfalls in the world of mods, albeit different ones. The primary drawback is the lack of money. Without the financial incentive that a retail game has to be published within a certain timeline to make money, it can be slightly easier to let a mod slide. While popular mods have to answer to fans' anticipation, deadlines are merely self-imposed rather than milestones that must be met to pay the bills.

But at the end of the day, the pitfalls pale next to the fact that making and playing your own game is sheer fun. The bigger issue is in getting as many people to play your mod as possible. The mod scene has yet to really take hold with the casual gamer, but publishers and developers are recognizing more and more the value that mods can add to their game.

The Sims Science

The Sims

The Sims is arguably the biggest game on the web in terms of mods and add-ons, likely because it appeals to both casual gamers and the hardcore crowd. Just about everyone plays *The Sims*—or has played *The Sims*—at one time or another.

While it's impossible to round up even a representative listing of add-ons, check out The Sims Resource. More of a catalogue than a website, this extraordinary reserve of all things *Sims* held over 25,000 separate listings at press time. This includes everything from the sublime to the bizarre. Meaning that you could grab a slinky little dress for the holidays at the same time as you grabbed a garden fountain that spurted blood. Samplers of these items are available on mail-order CDs. More specialized sites include Mall of The Sims, complete with 54 stores, Celebrity Sims, home of celebrity character skins, 7 Deadly Sims, which concentrates on floors and walls, and Sims.co.uk, a clearing house of *The Sims* downloads for the UK. It's also a good idea to make the official website a regular stop. The developers at Maxis often have freebies to share, so be sure to check in there from time to time.

One good thing about *The Sims* is that there is really no limit to the number and type of add-ons created. This can be a little daunting at first, though it is very refreshing after you get used to having thousands of choices.

The Sims Official Site: *www.thesims.com*
7 Deadly Sims: *www.7deadlysims.com*
Celebrity Sims: *www.celebritysims.com:81*
Mall of The Sims: *www.mallofthesims.com*
The Sims.co.uk: *www.thesims.co.uk*
The Sims Resource: *www.thesimsresource.com*

The Sims

Incentive To Download

When gamers spend $50 or more on a game, they naturally want to get as much value out of it as they can possibly squeeze. So the most compelling reason to keep an eye on the mod scene is obvious: you get free stuff.

A mod will never cost you a dime, unless your bandwidth is at a premium. Unless they've come to a special agreement with the developers and publishers, authors can't sell their mod or otherwise make money off of it due to copyright and intellectual property restrictions. So gamers end up with a wealth of great new add-ons for the game, and suddenly that $50 spent doesn't seem as hefty as it did in the checkout line. The value of a thriving mod community is emphasized even more with budget titles like *Serious Sam*, a $20 game that's practically a steal since its developers, Croteam, have been such staunch supporters of its burgeoning mod community, providing them with plenty of tools and encouragement.

And when this free stuff begins to approach or even surpass some retail games, it would be a crime not to check it out. While modding is still finding its legs in some genres like role-playing and strategy, other genres (action and first-

Older Games Science

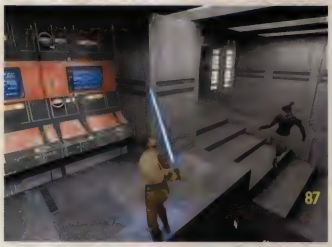
Thanks to the efforts of modders, good games need never grow old. Nothing freshens up a title that's been put on the shelf like a new map, mission, or even some rule tweaks. A few favorites from the past have thriving online mod communities, including the following:

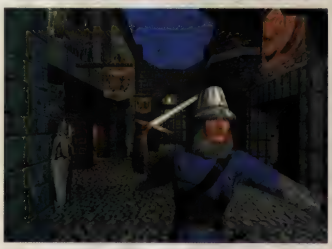
Half-Life: Modifications for this classic game are plentiful for both multiplayer and single-player. The former is well represented with the likes of *Team Fortress Classic*, *Counterstrike*, and *Day of Defeat*, while the latter boasts such treats as Neil Manke's *They Hunger* zombie-fest trilogy and *Drug Barons*, which depicts the first mission of Gordon Freeman, government operative. There are numerous *Half-Life* sites online to choose from, so a good starting point is the comprehensive I.am/Half-Life page. *half-life.pcgame.com*

Jedi Knight: Five-year-old technology or not, this *Star Wars* game continues to be regarded as one of the all-time greats thanks to magical storytelling and winning map design. Those touches can also be found in many of the single-player missions available on the web. Although there are lots of good ones, some of the very best include Chris Swan's *The New Empire* series, SavageX's *Remnants of the Empire* trilogy, and Anthony Piggott's *Tales of a Mercenary* duo. Hundreds of multiplayer maps are also ready for download—though it can be tough to find an online game these days. Note that some mods require the *Mysteries of the Sith* expansion pack. *www.massassi.net*

Quake and Quake II: The games that started it all still have their devotees. Hundreds, if not thousands, of maps, total conversions, and new modes of play have been created, and more are still being produced for *Quake* and *Quake II*, even though the majority of fans have moved to *Quake III Arena*. More *Quake II* mods might show up in upcoming months as well, as id Software's John Carmack released the game's source code at the end of 2001. *www.planetquake.com*

Thief Series: Both Thief: The Dark Project and Thief II: *The Metal Age* have dozens of missions available on the web, many of outstanding quality. Some, most notably The Gingerbread Man's *Benny's Dead*, Alex Thomson's *Ranstall Keep*, and Jussi Lehtinen's *Lord Edmund Entertains*, are as professionally designed as those produced by Looking Glass for the original games. *www.thief-thecircle.com*





Half-Life >>> Jedi Knight 2 >>> Thief II

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IN STORES FEB 2002

EA GAMES

Westwood Studios
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TEEN T
Blood
Violence
ESRB

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COMMAND & CONQUER RENEGADE
COMMAND & CONQUER RENEGADE
SUPPORTS gmax™ EDITING TOOL
COMMAND & CONQUER RENEGADE
EXPERIENCE COMMAND & CONQUER™ AT GROUND LEVEL

Before Max Payne came The Opera, a mod filled with stylistic rolls and dives modeled after the Hong Kong "blood operas."

person shooters, for instance, where the mod scene got its start) have had several years to mature and really build up the skills. The result is mods such as *Counterstrike*, which set records for surpassing retail games such as *Quake III Arena* and *Unreal Tournament* in number of players online. Other examples include *The Opera* for *Half-Life* (which is technically a total conversion) *Urban Terror* for *Quake III Arena*, and *Tactical Ops* for *Unreal Tournament*, all of which are almost unrecognizable from the base game and approach the quality of a full-scale retail product in a licensed engine.

A less obvious benefit is that creativity can be more unfettered in the mod community. Because they don't have a financial bottom line to answer to and because they're creating generally much smaller projects, mod authors can pretty much do whatever they want and get away with it

Sports Science

Killer mods may be almost unheard of, but there is no shortage of add-ons for games in the underappreciated sports genre. Roster packs, uniform patches, realistic stadium art, and much more are available for each of the major computer sports game series.

FIFA 2002: The most popular sport in the world is well represented online via a host of fan websites focused on the *FIFA* series from EA Sports. Perhaps the best place to start, however, is Soccergaming.com, a comprehensive page that covers the entire soccer gaming world, from *FIFA* to management sims like *Championship Manager*. The *FIFA* series is probably the best represented, though. A downloads section hosts all manner of add-ons, from rosters to kits to custom soccer balls. *www.soccergaming.com*

High Heat Major League Baseball: Followers of 3DO's outstanding baseball line should bookmark the High Heat Stadium in their browsers. In addition to lively chat boards, the site also hosts user-tweaked rosters, stadiums, uniforms, facepacks, various utilities, and tune files. Another site worth checking out, if only for older files, is *High Heat Central*. *www.sportplanet.com/highheat*, *www.highheatcentral.com*

Madden NFL: Although the online *Madden* community has calmed down over the past few years, the long-running football series still has a lot of support. Most of this support can be found on the web at MaddenMania. Head there for updated rosters and a custom teams section that's so complete it includes the late, unlamented XFL clubs. *www.maddenmania.com*

NBA Live: It may be taking a break on the PC for the 2001–2002 season, but *NBA Live* series fans can still get their fix for earlier editions at the NBA Live Series Center. Visit the page for all of your *NBA Live* needs, including rosters, custom jerseys, court art, and even player face patches. *www.sportplanet.com/nbalive*

NHL: Thunderpuck is the online home of EA Sports' *NHL* series of hockey sims. It provides one-stop-shopping for rosters, accurate arena and on-ice artwork, player face photos, and of course the latest version of Blomman's acclaimed NHL Editor. *www.sportplanet.com/thunderpuck*

Madden NFL 2002

NHL 2002

Unreal Tournament's Tactical Ops is a good example of a total conversion.

because the risk is much smaller—a gamer will likely download it and give it a try if they don't have to pay for it. *Leper Quake* for *Quake II* was a great example of a mod that probably never could have made it to a retail game—players had to shoot the limbs off of their opponents, at which point they could then pick them up and use them as weapons, beating their fellow players with their own severed limbs.

The mod community is also a place where fan input can often have a stronger impact on the development of the final product. While all game developers naturally would like to have as much fan input as possible into the making of their games, it's just not possible with the scale of a retail product. Mods, on the other hand, are usually more niche-oriented and tend to interest a smaller, more focused group of gamers. Since they're not trying to build anticipation for a retail product that they want fans to spend money on, their developers are more likely to release many betas of a mod as it evolves. Forums are almost always bristling with fan feedback, suggestions, bug reports, and heated debates about the balance between one weapon and another. Some fans find themselves so drawn into the mod scene in this way that they join a team and develop a mod themselves.

The Developer Element

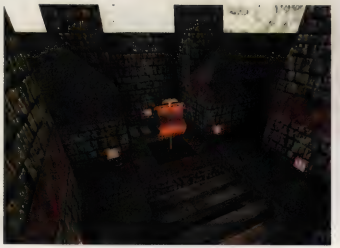
There are probably few who could have predicted the impact the open architecture of *DOOM* would have among the gaming community, least of all its creator, id Software. While John Carmack, id programmer and technology driver, opened the door by publishing the *DOOM* architecture specifications, the company primarily had a laissez-faire approach to the community, which blossomed without much effort on id's part. With *Quake*, they began to take a more active role by implementing the use of QuakeC, a scripting language that allowed users to alter the game code, and hence the mod revolution got underway at full steam.

It's clear that when it comes to mods, it's a win-win situation for gamers and mod authors alike. Gamers get something new to play for nothing more than what they'd already spent on the game, and mod authors get their creation and their names out there and into the public eye. But it isn't always clear what developers get out of the deal, especially when they're spending time and resources on support for something that isn't directly making them money. So what's the incentive?

"First, we enjoy seeing people find new ways to have fun with our game," says Kevin Cloud, id Software artist and veteran developer on id titles, from *Wolfenstein 3D* to the upcoming *DOOM* incarnation. "Great mods like *Rocket Arena* and *Urban Terror* give fans new ways to play our games without any effort from id beyond architecting the game to be modifiable. It would be impossible for a small developer like id to create the amount of content provided to our fans by outside mod developers."

That amount of content works in a developer and publisher's favor. If you have $50 burning a hole in your pocket, which are you more likely to spend it on: a game that wasn't designed to be extendable by fans, or one for which you know you'll see tons of new levels, mods, missions, and more? The bug in this approach is that it's difficult to assess a thriving mod community's direct affect on game sales since mods are an after-market phenomenon—no one's going to make any until *after* the game's release. Some developers do offer a little "undercover" assistance to would-be modders even before the product is released, but nothing is actually playable until the original is out the door.

But there's also a dark side to mods. The advent of the mod community opened a Pandora's box of issues that both mod authors and developers have had to wrestle with over the years. As the mod community matures and grows in its skills,



Unreal Fortress

one of those issues is competition. Every developer knows the story of *Counterstrike*, the mod that surpassed many retail games in popularity, and it's hard not to wonder how much money could have been made if it had originally been a retail release. As the quality of mods approaches or even surpasses that of retail games, there's the thought that they might start giving professional developers a run for their money.

Cloud, however, doesn't believe there's a danger here. "Arguably they are detrimental as they create some indirect competition, at least in the hardcore gaming circles, for official follow-up products like add-on packs," he says. "Since very few mods are promoted to a broader market, game sales are generally unaffected by the release of even the most popular mods. Clearly a good retail release of an add-on is more directly profitable than a great mod, but it doesn't make sense to analyze the benefit of mods as an impact on the original game's sales but instead as an influence on the market, particularly with the harder-core fans."

Another nasty issue that's reared its head as mods become

Wargames Science

Wargames are perhaps the original modder's heaven, because even before there were computers grognards were tweaking, changing, and adding new content to board games. With the PC, wargamers are just as active in providing new content as are fans of other game genres; there just aren't quite as many of them.

Combat Mission: This 3D WWII tactical game has spawned a legion of loyal modders and fans. Most mods simply change the 3D skins of the game's tanks and soldiers, making them more realistic and attractive, but some go beyond this and the usual user-create battles. One of the more extensive is *Desert Fox, Desert Rats*, which converts the game to handle battles in North Africa. Though it uses the same vehicles and data found in the original game, the graphics and terrain have all been changed to types more appropriate for the subject matter. *www.combatmission.com/, www.warfarehq.com/Mods/CM/cm_mods.htm, www.dragonlair.net/combatmission/, www.wargamer.com/cm/cmworld*

Combat Mission

HPS Simulations: The leading figure in graphics and sound mods for John Tiller's games (including his *Modern Campaigns* and pre-20th century titles) is Edward "Volcano Man" Williams, whose art enhancements are very popular. He uses a variety of sources to create unit portraits and sounds customized for each game. You can download his mods for free from Glenn Saunders' The Unofficial Panzer Campaigns Home Page; Saunders, himself a tester and scenario designer for many of HPS' games, also offers after action reports and informative articles on his site, including information on how to do your own editing. *www.hpssims.com, members.shaw.ca/gcsaunders*

Middle East '67

War at Sea: Naval Warfare Simulations specializes in heavy-duty mods for SSI's *Fighting Steel*, and have a new one underway for *Silent Hunter II* as well. Typically these mods alter the underlying rule and combat calculations of the original game in an attempt to introduce greater realism. The folks at SubSim Review also have an oar in, with a package of *Silent Hunter II* mods underway. And then there is *Harpoon 3*, a mod of the modern naval wargame *Harpoon II* that fixes

more sophisticated is that of intellectual property rights. Many gamers have taken the phrase "imitation is the best form of flattery" and applied it to a mod, creating a gaming tribute to their favorite movie, action hero, television show, or even another game. When developers create retail games based on franchises or popular characters, they must obtain a license to legally use that property. Mod authors, however, are often misguided into thinking that because they make no money from their mod, they're allowed to put whatever they'd like into it. Many intend no harm and simply want to make a fun mod with their favorite characters. In a similar vein, as more and more games are designed with an open content system, more and more mod authors create mods that port one game's content into another, a violation of some games' End User License Agreements.

Sadly, most of these projects end up in the mod graveyard as companies move to protect their intellectual property rights. Some companies do so more harshly than others—Fox Interactive is well-known in the mod community for its particular methods of ferreting out IP violations, so much so that the term "foxed" has come to mean any mod that's been shut down for infringement.

Getting Encouragement

Some companies have taken the opposite approach and encourage mod development. Bungie Software's 1994 first-person shooter *Marathon* is currently being developed as a mod for *Unreal Tournament* called *Marathon: Resurrection*, and the Bungie team has been following the mod's development closely, giving the team its blessing (though not openly endorsing the mod). Ritual Entertainment made an unprecedented move to help a small mod team take the *SiN* property and develop its clone for both *Quake III Arena* and *Unreal Tournament* by charging them $1 to use the property.

Despite these sticky issues, the end result of a mod community for games and their developers is a big bonus, clearly evident as more and more developers not only design their games to be easily mod-able, but create and release

War at Sea

Close Combat

many of the original's long list of bugs and adds features. Its creator Jesse Spears sells the game, which requires *Harpoon II Admiral's Edition*, and currently only works with PowerMacs, though a Windows version is in the works. *www.navalwarfare.net, www.subsim.com, www.harpoon3.com*

Steel Panthers: SSI's small-scale WWII tactical game is still the subject of not one but two active mod communities. The Camo Group makes *SPWW2*, currently up to version 5; it's a stand-alone mod of *Steel Panthers II*, which covered modern combat, modded to become a WWII tactical combat game. It's a free download and doesn't require the original. Then there is *Steel Panthers World at War* (SPWaW), which is available from Matrix Games. It too is a stand-alone game, but this time based on a heavily *modified Steel Panthers III* engine converted to the same scale and subject matter as the original *Steel Panthers*. *www.wargamer.com/spcammo, www.matrixgames.com*

Close Combat: These real-time tactical wargames by now-defunct Atomic Games also have a fairly active mod community. The mods range from RealRed for *Close Combat III*, which tries to enhance realism and historical fidelity within the framework of the existing game, to more ambitious mods that try to make completely new games, including some that replicate aspects of the Pacific Theater, WWI and even the Gulf War. *www.closecombat.org*

Shrapnel Games: Most of Shrapnel's games ship with full editors, and several are built around the assumption that players will generate their own content. *The War Engine*, for example, ships with seven very different game modules, all using the same turn-based wargame engine, and the flexibility it offers for design is unmatched. You can make not just new maps and new units, but you can simulate anything from giant robot battles to fantasy warfare, and more, with the same basic toolset. *www.shrapnelgames.com*

The War Engine

BID FOR POWER

Mod makers on mods

For most hardcore gamers, anime and gaming go hand in hand. It's not uncommon, then, to see ambitious fans create new game models based on their favorite characters—*Sailor Moon* has probably been modeled in every game conceivable. In the fall of 1999, a group of *Dragonball Z* fans got together to create an entire mod based on the popular anime universe. The project drew a huge underground following and became the poster child for intellectual property rights in the gaming industry as the mod came under fire for infringement, nearly shutting it down completely.

The mod has since evolved to survive, and in its evolution it's looking to be one of the most creative and well-done mods for *Quake III Arena*. Chris James, *Bid for Power* project lead, and David Wingrove, lead programmer, gave us their thoughts on their project as well as the state of the mod community today.

How did you deal with the issue of intellectual property and the Dragonball Z name, and how was it resolved?

James: When we began work on *Bid For Power*, we made several efforts to contact both Funimation and TOEI to inform them that we were developing a game based off of *Dragonball Z*, but we were never really taken seriously. Several months went by until, in December of 2000, Infogrames picked up the rights to create *Dragonball Z* games. Two days afterwards we received a cease and desist order from Funimation. After a few emails back and forth, Funimation became receptive to letting us continue work on *Bid For Power*.

Talks started to slow down until we were asked to submit our work to TOEI for approval in April of 2001. Months went by without any feedback from TOEI, and in July we emailed Funimation requesting that we be allowed to release in August since for the past eight months we had been working with them only to be put on the shelf. In early August we were sent a final Cease and Desist letter. With the second Cease And Desist order sent, we decided to take a different route and instead of dropping all our work and walking away, we decided to remove the *Dragonball Z* content and create our own original characters. We've rebounded from the near foxing and now are creating one of the most modified mods around.

What is it that attracted you to creating a mod for a game and investing so much personal time in something that you won't make money on?

James: People create mods for many different reasons, but the most common reason I find is usually to recreate a favorite part of a movie or a show, which happens to be the case with *Bid For Power*. Devoting your time and energy to a mod is a huge commitment that most can't come through on, but it's very much worth it. Working on a mod is good experience for the industry; often some of the best professionals have their roots in the mod community. Working on a mod gives you recognition and you meet some important people who can help you out later down the road. You gain experience, which is extremely important in the gaming industry.

How do you see mods as contributing to the success of a title, or not contributing, perhaps—do you feel that mods serve some other benefit?

James: To be sure, a title must stand on its own legs to be a commercial success. Just as a person doesn't buy a gaming console that promises to have a tools and software development kits (SDKs), and sometimes even put together officially sanctioned packs or add-ons of community content in order to promote them beyond a small hardcore fan base. id Software's *Quake II Extremities* expansion pack bundled together many popular mods back in the days of *Quake II*, while Sierra has released a Platinum edition of *Half-Life*, which bundles *Counter-strike* and other popular mods alongside the landmark shooter.

The bonus that the mod community brings to the table is not something that's escaped the notice of top developers, nor is it limited to the action genre in which it started. Trends show that role-playing games are shaping up to be the next wave in mod activity. Bioware's *Neverwinter Nights* and Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* are getting almost as much attention for their tools and development kits as they are for the games themselves, and many are expecting them to be the cornerstones in a new world where original games become the ultimate playground for anyone who's ever wanted to create his own fantasy role-playing universe.

Gas Powered Games' Chris Taylor learned the value of mods when his strategy blockbuster *Total Annihilation* became a modding hit. "What we thought would take years to evolve and grow in the community only took a few months," he says. "Nobody expected the community to grow to the size it did. It seemed like there was always some new thing being discovered in the game engine, whether it be with a unit's weapon, the AI, or a new map. Even to this day, there is still an amazing bunch of people working on stuff who have come together from all over the world to form this community."

With mods, then, being such an important facet of modern games, it's natural to wonder if developers are changing the way they design games from the start to take mods into account, and how this could impact development. For id Software, it isn't the game design that's changing, Kevin Cloud says, so much as the focus of their attention. "It's more difficult to predict the impact on id's development time not in regards to supporting mod teams but in the time it takes to counteract cheats and hacks. The ability to cheat and hack any given game grows exponentially when source code is released."

Taylor explains that the design of *Dungeon Siege* has taken mods into account from the beginning. "Almost every aspect of the game is data driven, with a few exceptions, that make it easy to modify the game, and/or create new content. We are releasing the Siege Editor, which is used to assemble maps and worlds, and place items, trees, monsters, and effectively anything at all you would find in the game."

Game developers aren't the only ones doing their part to foster the community. Until recently, most software packages used to edit games to create mods were priced for a

After great success with the mod community for Total Annihilation...

corporate office, not the average gamer's budget. Tools like Discreet's 3D Studio Max, used to create game models, are just too pricey for most gamers. Recognizing that, Discreet recently released a free version of 3DSMax called gmax.

Chris Taylor believes that this is an important step in fostering a better community, and Gas Powered Games is taking advantage of such tools. "Before gmax came along, those who wanted to create new content had to own a copy of a 3D modeling tool like 3D Studio Max, and this was a somewhat prohibitive barrier for many who wanted to try their hand at this sort of work. Now with gmax, the sky is the limit; anyone can download this and start creating new stuff in no time and we should see a wide range of very diverse and interesting new content after *Dungeon Siege* and gmax are released. The overall effect will be a stronger, diverse, and empowered community, that will have better tools to create better mods."

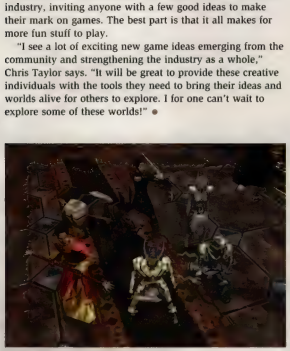
The Modding Future

Companies may have had a hands-off approach to mod makers in the past, but most are revising that policy, instead choosing to get more involved in mods and their creators. In what has almost become an id Software tradition, John Carmack talked about how mod-friendly their anticipated new *DOOM* game will be in his QuakeCon 2001 keynote speech. When buying a new game, gamers can almost always find not just the game but the tools to create new levels and mods for it on the same CD.

As the mod community matures in all genres, developers are always looking for ways to stay in step and ensure a happy community of developers. "In the past we've assisted mod makers directly in various ways from providing advice to equipment or funding," says Kevin Cloud. "Moving forward, [id Software programmer] Robert Duffy and I have discussed a couple of ways id can assist the mod community, including early source and tool releases to specific teams or managing a separate budget to seed mod teams with development tools. However, mod teams are often spread across the world, and arguably it may be counterproductive for a developer to become overly involved in an inherently enthusiast industry."

That enthusiasm has radically changed an already young industry, inviting anyone with a few good ideas to make their mark on games. The best part is that it all makes for more fun stuff to play.

"I see a lot of exciting new game ideas emerging from the community and strengthening the industry as a whole," Chris Taylor says. "It will be great to provide these creative individuals with the tools they need to bring their ideas and worlds alive for others to explore. I for one can't wait to explore some of these worlds!" ●



...Chris Taylor of Gas Powered Games is taking pains to follow up on that success with Dungeon Siege.

modem simply because of that suggestion, they won't buy a game on the promise of mods. If a game is successful, and is moddable, then it will likely get mods, which can then in turn have some small impact on sales (people who buy the game because there are so many extras to get for it). Mods give players more bang for their dollar, but the main benefit mods have is really reflected in the people who make the mods—they gain professional style experience, and very often take the small step into an actual studio. This is the biggest effect mods have on the industry and gaming.

Wingrove: Most games don't need to worry about mod developers. A solid game that's fun to play will always sell well. With companies going under right and left, most game companies just need to concentrate on creating games that will keep them in business.

If you could help guide the direction of game design over the next several years, how would you direct it from your perspective as a mod developer? What would you like to see happen to help the mod scene?

James: If I could steer the direction for help in the mod scene, I'd have to say I'd like to see more companies opening up their software to modifications, and not just in the first person genre but games like *Diablo, Command & Conquer, Final Fantasy,* Branching out into different genres and opening up all games, not just the same types. It could be something as different as a Chess game on your computer—who wouldn't enjoy chess using Hulk Hogan as a chess piece? Imagine the possibilities with a game as massive as *Final Fantasy*.

Wingrove: Everybody who makes a game nowadays needs to decide right from the beginning, "Are we going to create a game or are we going to create a mod engine?" If they decide to make a game, all of the design decisions can be framed from the viewpoint of what will make that particular game work. If they decide to make a mod engine, every design decision has to be viewed from what is the most flexible way to do what the game needs. Making a game and then just releasing parts of the source code won't cut it anymore.

As a mod programmer I look for the biggest, baddest, and most flexible engine to work with. The base game is much less important to me than what I can turn it in to. The farther away a *Quake III* mod gets from a first person shooter, the more difficult the mod becomes to create. It's still very much a first person shooter engine rather than a game engine, but with enough effort it can be turned into almost anything. If just a little more of the low level parts of the engine were released to mod programmers, it really could be turned into any type of game.

For more on Bid For Power, check out the game's website at www.bidforpower.com

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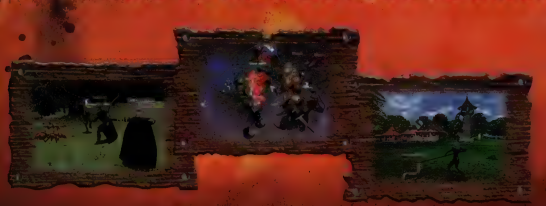

www.darkageofcamelot.com

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Illustration by Terese Nielsen
www.tnielsen.com

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11TH ANNUAL COMPUTER GAMES AWARDS

Computer Games 2001 THE YEAR'S BEST

2001 served up its share of ups and downs, and more than a few surprises. At the end of the year, we sat down with all our writers and sorted out the good and the bad, applied a little 20/20 hindsight, and selected the best games of the year. Some familiar trends continued in 2001—the adventure genre is still in a rut the size of the Grand Canyon yet we still saw *Myst III*, and strategy is still the strongest overall genre. The glut of real-time strategy fare seems never-ending, but a few games such as *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns* offer new twists on the genre. Role-playing offerings were somewhat sparse, but a few of the games that did make it out (such as *Arcanum* and *Wizardry 8*) were solid, epic productions. Simulations made a surprisingly strong showing with old school games (*IL-2 Sturmovik*, *Flight Simulator 2002*) and some new blood (*Xtreme Air Racing*). It just goes to show that when it comes to predicting the future of PC gaming, all bets are off…

…Unless you are betting that publishers will insist on foisting a few sloppily half-baked games on unsuspecting consumers. Train wrecks are one of the few constants in this industry; you can read all about them on page 56.

In the meantime, check out the best games of 2001. The envelope, please…

Contributors: William Abner, Denny Atkin, Victoria Avalon, John Brandon, Andrew Bub, James Cobb, Alan Lackey, David Long, Rick Moscatello, Scott Osborne, Matthew Peckham, David Perkins, Marshal Rosenthal, Peter Smith, Peter Suciu, Brett Todd, Scott Udell, Jeff Vitous, Kelly Wand, David Wildgoose

Add-on

Diablo II: Lord of Destruction

DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER Vivendi Universal

FINALISTS

Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal [BIOWARE/INTERPLAY]

The Sims: Hot Date [MAXIS/ELECTRONIC ARTS]

If you'd like to see everything that an expansion pack should be, just fire up *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction*. Where most expansions offer more of the same, this title breaks the mold and elevates an already excellent game to a whole new level. This is more than just another Act. The additions are patched right into the main game, so that all five Acts benefit from the makeover. And what a makeover it is, lifting almost all of the tedium-providers, and adding enough interesting things so that even if you've played the original to death, there is enough to suck you right back in for more. It adds an 800 x 600 resolution mode (once you try it, you'll never go back). It adds more polish and game balance tweaks than you can shake a socketed stick at. Add-on developers take note—the bar has been raised.

Adventure

Myst III: Exile

DEVELOPER Presto Studios

PUBLISHER Ubi Soft

FINALISTS
Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare [DARKWORKS & SPIRAL HOUSE/INFOGRAMES]
In Cold Blood [REVOLUTION/DREAMCATCHER INTERACTIVE]

Busy with their massively multiplayer project (codenamed *Mudpie*), Cyan brought in adventure game veteran Presto Studios (*The Journeyman Project*) to take up the reigns for the next game in the blockbuster *Myst* series. It was a good call on Cyan's part—the folks at Presto did the series proud with the *Myst III: Exile*. It comes as a breath of fresh air amidst the otherwise barren crop of adventure titles. It hearkens back to all the elements that made the original games so much fun—beautiful and atmospheric environments, subtle storytelling that casts you as the main character, and a host of surreal contraptions and puzzles. It's a carefully crafted tribute by a group of people that obviously have great respect for their source material. Most importantly, it's great fun.

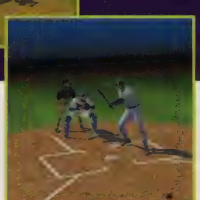
Sports

High Heat Baseball 2002

DEVELOPER 3DO

PUBLISHER 3DO

FINALISTS
Front Office Football: The College Years [SOJOURN SOFTWARE/SOFTWARE]
NHL 2002 [EA SPORTS/EA SPORTS]



Sometimes great things take time. Such is the case with *High Heat Baseball 2002*. A compelling retooling of a great series, the game was hampered at launch by numerous game-killing bugs. 3DO stepped up to the plate and patched the worst of the problems, however, and the resulting game is easily the most entertaining sports experience of the year.

The game is baseball at its best, with sumptuous visuals, dynamic ball physics, a raised pitching mound, dropped third strikes, catcher snap-throws for picking off a runner, player ejections and suspensions, manager mound visits, pitchers that move on the rubber, descriptive injuries, rain delays... the list goes on. Buy yourself some peanuts and Cracker Jacks, sit back, and enjoy the game.

Racing

NASCAR Racing 4

DEVELOPER Papyrus Racing Games

PUBLISHER Sierra

FINALISTS
Screamer 4x4 [CLEVER'S DEVELOPMENT/VIRGIN INTERACTIVE]
Leadfoot [RATBAG/WIZARDWORKS]

There are a few constants in the PC game industry. Games never come out on time. *Daikatana* is good fodder for snide jokes. Papyrus makes great racing games. *NASCAR Racing 4* is no exception to that last rule—it's the definitive "go fast, turn left" experience on the PC, the best thing on four wheels in a year of solid contenders. That's the Papyrus version of more of the same.

The visuals are outstanding. The game sports a physics model that is every bit as believable (if a little more forgiving) than the one in *Grand Prix Legends*. Best of all (or worst, depending on your perspective), it adds the ability for cars to catch air and flip, making for some pretty spectacular crashes. Add the best implementation of online racing that you can find and a large and dedicated player community, and you have the crown King of racing games.

Computer Games 2001 THE YEAR'S BEST

Strategy

Sid Meier's Civilization III

DEVELOPER Firaxis

PUBLISHER Infogrames

FINALISTS
Rails Across Amerira [FLYING LAB SOFTWARE: STRATEGY FIRST]
Europa Universalis [PARADOX ENTERTAINMENT: STRATEGY FIRST]

Perhaps the most telling comment that one could make about *Civilization III* is that it feels different than past *Civilization* games, even though in many ways it isn't. The folks at Firaxis have taken one of the most beloved games of all time and made it feel new again. That deserves recognition.

There are plenty of changes, to be sure. This game is a much larger leap forward than *Civilization II* was over the first game. There are the things that you notice right away, the better graphics and interface design, the improved pacing, more detailed diplomacy, new game elements such as Culture and Resources and all-new victory conditions. Then there are the more subtle things, subtle touches such as the game's exquisite balance and undeniable addictiveness (just… one… more… turn). It's the best *Civilization* yet, and that's saying something.

Simulation

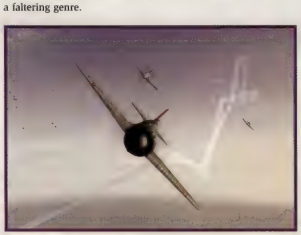
IL-2 Sturmovik

DEVELOPER 1C: Maddox Games

PUBLISHER Ubi Soft

FINALISTS
Flight Simulator 2002 [MICROSOFT]
Xtreme Air Racing [VICTORY SIMULATIONS]

IL-2 Sturmovik is the best World War II flight sim—the best sim of any kind, for that matter—to come along in years. Set on the somewhat neglected Eastern Front, the game puts you in the pilot seat of the plane dubbed the "flying tank" by Russian soldiers, as well as a host of other aircraft. It's also a poster child for attention to detail, from the dynamic and very believable flight physics to the meticulously crafted terrain. The AI is as good (or better) than anything else out there. Turn on your autopilot and switch to an external view, and you can have fun just watching the AI pilots duke it out amongst themselves. It's a trip back to the Golden Age of flight simulators… and hopefully a sign of better things to come for a faltering genre.



Role-playing (Tied for category)

Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura

DEVELOPER Troika Games

PUBLISHER Sierra

Wizardry 8

DEVELOPER Sir-tech Canada Ltd.

SIR-TECH Canada Ltd.

FINALISTS
Gothic [PIRANHA BYTES: NICAT INTERACTIVE]

Yeah, it's a tie. Yeah, it's a cop-out. On the one hand you have a phenomenally well-written character-driven game set in a completely new (and incredibly creative) world. On the other you have Sir-Tech's opus, the eighth sequel to one of the longest-running role-playing series around, the best party-based loot-gathering dungeon-crawl you've played since *Crusaders of the Dark Savant*. Role-playing fans split pretty evenly into two camps.

The truth is, you can't go wrong with either of these titles. That's a good thing, because there weren't many role-playing games to choose from in 2001, and even fewer good ones. Play both and decide for yourself which game reigns supreme. These two games could easily keep you questing through 2003 if you let them. Which is exactly what we recommend that you do.

Wargame

Bulge '44

DEVELOPER John Tiller

PUBLISHER HPS Simulations

FINALISTS
Combat Command 2: Desert Rats [BOKU STRATEGY GAMES/SHRAPNEL GAMES]
Squad Battles Vietnam [JOHN TILLER/HPS SIMULATIONS]

John Tiller's *Panzer Campaigns* games have all been solid, but *Bulge '44* moves beyond competent into the truly wonderful category. It's a subject near and dear to American wargamers' hearts, lovingly presented and well researched. Playing the campaign scenario as the Germans offers a satisfying challenge even against the AI, and defensive battles are also fun, especially if you give the computer a few extra divisions to play with.

HPS has slowly but surely built a very strong foundation in wargaming, and this is perhaps their most mature game to date, blending good looks, a mature game system, and excellent customer support and extensibility. In a year with a number of very good wargames (including a few other Tiller projects), this latest John Tiller design stands at the top of the heap.

Hardware

GeForce 3

DEVELOPER NVIDIA

FINALISTS
Athlon XP [AMD]
Soundblaster Audigy [CREATIVE LABS]

Hardware is the subject of a technical endeavor rather than a creative one, and the improvements are usually incremental. Sometimes that increment is pretty large, but clearly groundbreaking work is harder to come by than with games. In a year when some excellent products pushed the "smaller, faster, cheaper" curve harder than ever, the GeForce 3 brought something truly new to the table. The concept of pixel and vertex shaders, now available in several products, will do more to improve graphics on the PC than anything since the Voodoo 2. It's such a dramatic new direction for PC graphics that we haven't even seen the first game to truly exploit the technology, and when we do, there will be no going back. Buying a GeForce 3 last spring was an investment in the future that could last a year and a half, and that's remarkable.

Online

Dark Age of Camelot

DEVELOPER Mythic Entertainment

PUBLISHER Sierra

FINALISTS
Shattered Galaxy [NEXON]
Asheron's Call: Dark Majesty [TURBINE ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE/MICROSOFT]

Mythic Entertainment's online role-playing game *Dark Age of Camelot* came out of nowhere. It's existence was no secret, but who would have guessed that it would end up being this much fun? It doesn't exactly rewrite the book on massively multiplayer gaming, but it does transcribe the book in loving detail, with big friendly print and colorful illustrations.

If you've played online role-playing games before, you know the drill. You kill things. You take their stuff. Superficially this game closely resembles all the other online games on the market, but the proof is in the details. The game plays like a bullet list of "things players wish would work differently in *EverQuest*." Toss in three separate (and competing) Realms for players to muck around in and the innovative concept of Realm versus Realm combat, and you can kiss your spare time goodbye.

Computer Games 2001 THE YEAR'S BEST

BEST ART DIRECTION
Myst III: Exile
[Presto Studios/Ubi Soft]

BEST TECHNOLOGY
AquaNox
[Massive Development/Fishtank Interactive]

BEST MUSIC
Tropico
[PopTop Software/Gathering of Developers]

BEST SOUND
Aliens versus Predator 2
[Monolith/Fox Interactive]

BEST WRITING
Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
[Troika Games/Sierra]

BEST AI
Operation Flashpoint
[Bohemia Interactive Studios/Codemasters]

BEST MULTIPLAYER
Rails Across America
[Flying Lab Software/Strategy First]

BEST INTERFACE
Black & White
[Lionhead Studios/Electronic Arts]

BEST ACTING
Brad Dourif, Myst III: Exile
[Presto Studios/Ubi Soft]

BEST INDEPENDENT GAME
Starships Unlimited
[Andrew P. Evancievich]

Action

Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis

DEVELOPER **Bohemia Interactive**

PUBLISHER **Codemasters**

FINALISTS
Clive Barker's Undying [DREAMWORKS INTERACTIVE/ELECTRONIC ARTS]
Aliens Versus Predator 2 [MONOLITH/FOX INTERACTIVE]

Operation Flashpoint was another easy choice, even though the game doesn't fit into quite the same mold as the rest of the action ilk. It's more a battlefield simulator than a shooter, and what a simulator it is. Incredible environments, highly reactive AI, believable weapons, a host of drivable vehicles make for the best first-person battlefield experience you'll find.

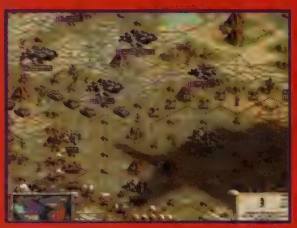
The game's biggest triumph is that it actually rewards the use of tactics. Though you start the game as a lowly corporal, taking orders from your squad sergeant, you rapidly gain more responsibility, eventually controlling multiple men and vehicles. The Russians you face move and fight in believable and effective ways, making good use of cover, fire, and movement, and they are fairly observant. It doesn't play quite like any other action game out there, and that's a good thing—especially in a game that's this much fun.

GAME OF THE YEAR
Sid Meier's Civilization III

DEVELOPER **Firaxis** PUBLISHER **Infogrames**

The folks at Firaxis have done it again. It would be easy to dismiss *Civilization III* as just another iteration of a great game, a title that attains greatness by standing atop an already solid foundation. But to penalize the game for its ancestry is unfair. Fond memories of the original game—a title that many people consider one of the best, if not the best, PC games ever made—create even higher expectations for a sequel. That it both meets and exceeds those expectations is an accomplishment worthy of note.

In some respects, it's amazing the game works at all. *Civilization III* offers the largest leap in gameplay since the series began, adding a bunch of new features and altering many of the existing ones while retaining the epic sweep that makes the game so compelling. It's a tricky tightrope act—the game manages to simultaneously feel both fresh and nostalgic. As you've done thousands of times in previous versions, you still



Real-time Strategy

Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns

DEVELOPER Timegate Studios

PUBLISHER Strategy First

FINALISTS
Commandos 2: Men of Courage [PYRO/EIDOS]
Cossacks: European Wars [GSC GAME WORLD/STRATEGY FIRST]

This year's real-time strategy race wasn't even close. Newcomer Timegate Studios cinched the race with *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns*, and then followed it up with more of the same in *Kohan: Ahriman's Gift*. Play one, play the other, play both—it's a win/win/win scenario. It puts the "strategy" back (if it ever truly was there in the first place) into real-time strategy, eliminating micromanagement and frantic tactical considerations in favor of a more thoughtful "commanding the troops" approach. You make the big decisions, such as which units serve in which regiments, where you build your cities, and when and how your regiments engage. The game AI handles the details of combat, leaving you free to deal with high-level concerns. It's a refreshing approach, and it works. Of course it helps that the game has great AI, a fantastic variety of game modes and options, and a slick interface.

The Civilization III Team

explore the world, found and build up cities, negotiate and wage war with other civilizations, and research new technologies (now structured in ages, and featuring a superb little interface for queuing their order). The ultimate goal: staking your place in the grand pantheon of world leaders.

Some of the new twists may seem minor, but many of them have strong repercussions in how the game unfolds and in which strategies are effective. The addition of Culture and national borders turns the first third of the game into a frenetic land grab in which each nation scrambles to establish their territory. The new system of resources makes some territory more desirable and makes the choice of where to build that much more important. It also forces you to use diplomacy—if you don't have what you need, perhaps another leader will give it to you... for a price. The extra victory conditions give you entirely new ways to play the game.

But the game's appeal isn't limited to new features—it's also the most polished (and prettiest) *Civilization* game to date. You might not immediately notice the hundreds of little tweaks and adjustments Firaxis has made to combat, and Wonders, and advances and more, but it all shows through in play. Firaxis obviously spent a lot of time doing exactly that—playing the game. Enhancing the stuff that works. Eliminating the stuff that doesn't. When your eyes finally start to droop and you realize that "one more turn" has turned into two, and then ten, and then one hundred or more, you're glad that they did.

Computer Games 2001 THE YEAR'S BEST

BEST MUTATED TYPING GAME
Typing of the Dead
[Sonic/Int/Empire Interactive]

THE NOT THE BEST AT ANYTHING AWARD
Serious Sam
[Croteam/Gathering of Developers]

THE "I NEED HOW MUCH RAM?" AWARD
EverQuest: Shadows of Luclin
[Sony]

WORST IMPLEMENTATION OF A COOL NEW TECHNOLOGY
Geomod: Red Faction
[Volition/THQ]

THE RAYMOND CHANDLER IS ROLLING IN HIS GRAVE AWARD
Max Payne
[Remedy Entertainment/Gathering of Developers]

BIGGEST LAUNCH
World War II Online
[Cornered Rat Software/Strategy First]

AMERICAN MCGEE'S NAME ABOVE THE TITLE AWARD
Battlecruiser Millenium: A Derek Smart Simulation
[3000 AD Inc.]

MOST SPOT-ON TITLE
Gorasul
[SILVER Style/JoWood PRODUCTIONS]

MOST OVERRATED GAME
Black & White
[Lionhead Studios/Electronic Arts]

SECOND MOST OVERRATED GAME
Black & White
[Lionhead Studios/Electronic Arts]

WORST GAMES OF 2001

Recognizing failure is as important as rewarding success. Knocks are taken, lessons are learned, and we're all better people for it. When a game goes bad, a good developer will take a long, critical look at what went wrong, and where, and how it might fix it the next time around. When you buy a bad game, you should take a long, critical look at where you bought it, and how quickly you can get back there, and whether they take returns—there's no need to reward failure with your hard earned cash. The following are five games from 2001 you should avoid like the plague.

Age of Sail II

[AKELLA/TALONSOFT]

When a bad game is riddled with bugs, you generally don't give it a second (or even a first) thought. When a potentially brilliant game is riddled with bugs, well.... With that in mind, *Age of Sail II* (above) is arguably the best Worst Game of 2001. Poor documentation and a general lack of polish round out the package.

Freedom: First Resistance

[RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT]

It's tough to say where this game went wrong... the most. Perhaps it was the endless array of "find the key" puzzles. Perhaps it's the fact that the action involves little more than lining up an enemy and clicking the left mouse button as quickly as possible until someone dies (that someone is often you, as your character will occasionally, inexplicably pause and allow a foe to get in an extra shot or two). Perhaps it's the horrible visuals, or audio, or productions values. There is so much to hate. Take your pick.

Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor

[STORMFRONT STUDIOS/UBI SOFT]

The year's biggest disappointment comes courtesy of Stormfront Studios. *Pool of Radiance: The Ruins of Myth Drannor* (above) was meant to be a wildly ambitious return to the Golden Age of the Gold Box games. Instead it was merely a boring, buggy dungeon crawl. It secures its place in history as the first game to use (or rather, abuse) the *Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition* rules.

Throne of Darkness

[CLICK ENTERTAINMENT/SIERRA]

This is the winner of the annual "They Just Don't Get It" award. The folks at Click Entertainment deserve some credit; it can't be easy to take a concept as simple and well established as *Diablo* and exorcise all the fun out of it. That's exactly what they did in this future bargain bin landmine, however. A round of applause, please.

Triple Play Baseball

[EA SPORTS]

Once you get past the "fingernails on chalkboard" sound effects in this game... well, honestly you will never get past them. But if you did, hypothetically, you would find one of the worst simulations of baseball currently available for the PC, "enhanced" with Fox-Trax style baseball comet trails and on-field player collisions that are more violent than most suburban high schools. Note that we said "most" high schools.

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play games.

play games.

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BEST OF 2002

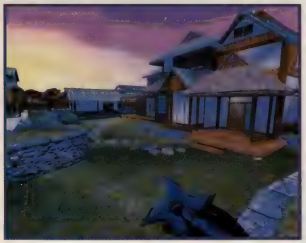
Games (we think) we want to play this year

This is the part where we look forward and offer our predictions for the games that we think will be next year's award winners. In order to minimize our future embarrassment (see "Reality Check"), we've limited our picks to only the most promising games. The cream of the crop. The products with that special... something. You know, the stuff that might actually ship before the end of the year. Or not.

The Operative 2

DEVELOPER **Monolith**
PUBLISHER **Fox Interactive**
RELEASE DATE **Late 2002**

Monolith has been on a roll lately. *Aliens Versus Predator 2* was one of the best action games of 2001, and their kitschy 1960s spy thriller *No One Lives Forever* (the first "*Operative*" game) was our Game of the Year pick for 2000. Does that bode well for the sequel (below)? We have our fingers crossed. One caveat: of all the games on this list, this one probably stands the greatest chance of getting bumped to 2003.



Warlords IV

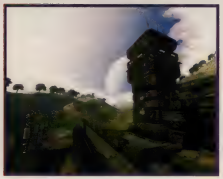
DEVELOPER **SSG**
PUBLISHER **Ubi Soft**
RELEASE DATE **Summer 2002**

It's been a while since the Strategic Studies Group has done a turn-based *Warlords* game (below right), but fans still remember the glory days of *Warlords II*. You will likely see the sequel to the real-time *Warlords Battlecry* before this game, but don't let that get you down. SSG has great things in store for their next turn-based epic. They are adding several major new features, such as the ability to build your own cities (in some scenarios, at least) and a tactical combat mode, a la *Heroes of Might and Magic*. Ironically, this may end up being a better *Heroes of Might and Magic* than the next *Heroes of Might and Magic*. You'll find out later this year.

Unreal 2

DEVELOPER **Legend Entertainment**
PUBLISHER **Infogrames**
RELEASE DATE **Spring 2002**

What do you get when you combine Epic Games' next *Unreal* engine and setting with the storytelling abilities of Legend Entertainment? Hopefully you get something very special with *Unreal 2* (above). Legend is promising the world a combination of squad-based tactical combat (think *Ghost Recon*, but with more Skaarj) and seamless storytelling (think *Half-Life*). If the bizarre weapons from the original *Unreal* were not to your liking, you will be happy to find a contrasting arsenal of "comfort food" that includes a pistol, a shotgun, a high rate of fire machine gun, a rocket launcher, a sniper rifle, a flame thrower, and a grenade launcher. If you preferred the exotics, don't worry—you will have a chance to get your hands on those as well when the game ships later this spring.



Deus Ex 2
Thief 3

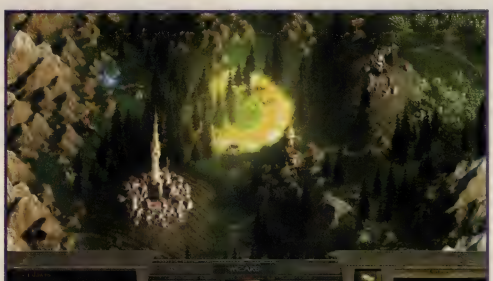
DEVELOPER **ION Storm Austin**
PUBLISHER **Eidos**
RELEASE DATE **Late 2002**

One of these games will probably come out in 2002. Which will it be? Who knows. We are looking forward to both, so it doesn't really matter. *Thief 3* is the follow-up to one of the most innovative action/adventures of all time, a series that many fans feared dead when developer Looking Glass closed its doors in 2000. It's the penultimate first-person looter, a game about *avoiding* combat, sneaking around, and taking things that don't belong to you. *Deus Ex 2* is part shooter, part role-playing game, a formula that hearkens back to our 1999 Game of the Year, *System Shock 2*. Details about both games are sparse, but each comes from a very strong pedigree.

Age of Wonders II

DEVELOPER Triumph Studios
PUBLISHER Take 2 Interactive
RELEASE DATE Spring 2002

We were impressed in spite of ourselves with last month's cover game, *Age of Wonders II* (right). Visually stunning, this game promises a wealth of strategic depth and gameplay that includes a lengthy campaign, numerous stand-alone missions, and (potentially) a random map generator. Triumph Studios has had years to fiddle with game balance since the genesis of the first game, and they promise better AI and more interesting tactical combat in the sequel. Will it be the spiritual successor to the classic *Master of Magic*? Only time will tell, but the stars are aligned...



Combat Mission 2: Barbarossa to Berlin

DEVELOPER Big Time Software
PUBLISHER Battlefront
RELEASE DATE Summer 2002

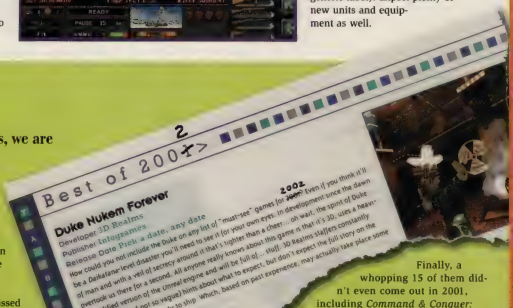
The sequel to last year's Wargame of the Year (and a strong contender for Game of the Year), *Combat Mission 2: Barbarossa to Berlin* (right) seems a safe bet for grognards. Along with the move to the Eastern Front, Battlefront is planning significant upgrades and changes to the game engine, such as an increase in the default interface resolution, graphic displays for armor strength, and the addition of hierarchical military structures (you can mark a unit as "1st Squad, 1st Platoon, E Company, 3rd Battalion," rather than make do with a generic label). Expect plenty of new units and equipment as well.

REALITY CHECK

When it comes to predictions, we are Nostradamus (of the Dead)

How valuable are our predictions? Very! Just take a look at the "Best of 2001" games we highlighted in last year's awards feature. Of the 29 games we included, exactly one of them (*NASCAR Racing 4*) won an award this year. Consider the games we *didn't* pick, such as *Civilization III*, *Operation Flashpoint*, and *Dark Age of Camelot*; the latter we summarily dismissed as unimpressive after seeing it at the Electronic Entertainment Expo.

Five other picks received above average reviews, including *Aliens Versus Predator 2*, *MechCommander 2*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Tropico* and *Battle Realms*. The fate of six varied from mediocre to terrible—*Anarchy Online*, *Empire Earth*, *Motor City Online*, *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor*, *Emperor: Battle for Dune*, and *Black & White*—and two managed to be cancelled, *Dreamland Chronicles: Freedom Ridge* and *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin*.



Finally, a whopping 15 of them didn't even come out in 2001, including *Command & Conquer: Renegade*, *Dungeon Siege*, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, *Freedom Force*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Freelancer*, *Halo*, *Sigma* (now called *Impossible Creatures*), *Team Fortress 2*, *The Sims Online*, *Soldier of Fortune II*, *Star Trek: Bridge Commander*, *Star Wars Galaxies Online*, and *WarCraft III*. We are still highly anticipating these games, for what it's worth (not much, apparently). Some of them won't come out in 2002, either, and some still have time to be cancelled. Some, like *Duke Nukem Forever*... well, there's nothing quite like *Duke Nukem Forever*.

TECHNICALITIES

2002 predictions

Same as it ever was

I know you're probably reading this in February, but we made it throughout December, so by way of the little magazine miracle time warp, it's still 2001 for me. So with that in mind, here are my predictions for next year, some of which may have already happened by now.

NVIDIA will get bigger. Yup, more revenue, more profit, more engineers, more products, you name it. They'll take away a little more market share on the desktop and start to seriously erode ATI's lock on the mobile market. They'll release a new high-end card early in the year that's like a GeForce 3 Super Mega Ultra Hyper-Fighting Edition, almost absurdly fast but no amazing new features. They'll continue to offer good value on the low end. But late in the year, they'll have some truly new tech (accompanying DirectX 9) that'll make John Carmack wish that he was even more aggressive with the new *DOOM* game's technology.

New hot thing. Someone will come out of nowhere and challenge the 3D leaderboard, which chiefly consists of ATI and NVIDIA right now. It might be a product from the PowerVR guys, it might be something from Matrox, it might be that Finnish Bitboys company we hear about every now and again, but it's coming. They'll get a lot of excitement based on previews, but the tech will be delayed hitting the shelves, giving NVIDIA time to release something comparable in the same rough timeframe. Ultimately it won't usurp the 3D throne, but it'll put the fear of God into the big boys.

Resolutions. 3D games will continue to ship with default resolutions of 640x480, despite the fact that most of the world does not have a 15" monitor anymore, and virtually all 3D games would look better overall at something like 1024x768, even if that means turning of a few bells and whistles.

Sound predictions. There will be one or two new sound card technologies, and they'll be good, but nothing worth really getting excited over. Nobody's going to give the average gamer a good reason to rip out his or her Sound Blaster Live just yet.

LCD action. LCD monitors are getting cheaper now, and come springtime there will be some quality improvements, but they'll really start to take off late in the year. Sure, it'll definitely be a lot costlier than a normal CRT monitor, but LCD displays of fantastic clarity and contrast will come down to a price where they're a very real option for general computer buyers. The Dells and Gateways of the world will sell some $1000 PCs with good LCD monitors.

Benchmarks. Far too few games will have reliable, repeatable benchmarking capabilities, making it ever harder to judge true relative performance of PC hardware in a meaningful and broad manner. It will also increase the ability of hardware manufacturers to optimize for the few applications that can be benchmarked, masking performance deficiencies elsewhere.

Buggy messes. Several highly anticipated games will be released as completely buggy messes, as usual. They'll still sell great the first week, because nobody will know by then that they're broken and the buzz is high, and the publishers and developers will simply have no economic incentive to improve quality assurance.

Xbox rocks. After a relatively slow January-April, the Xbox will really shine at E3, with some very impressive exclusive games on display. PC gamers will stop bitching about it being just a PC in a smaller box, and start bitching about how the Xbox is stealing all the good games, licenses, and developers.

Quality will improve. Despite the above prediction, 2002 will be a banner year for PC game quality, with highly polished, fun, and technically impressive games that enjoy greater after-market support as a whole than the industry's ever seen. There will be just as many crappy games as before, but the great games will shine brighter.

Sega smokes EA. Earlier than expected, Sega will sell more console games than Electronic Arts. EA's PC franchises will be responsible for them keeping the overall "biggest game publisher" crown. This will both scare the living crap out of EA, and push them to focus more on the PC, where Sega has no intention of competing. The results of this won't bear out until later in 2003, but the seeds will be planted late in 2002.

Hammer hurts 'em. AMD's 64-bit "Hammer" processors will just barely make it out the door next year, but they'll be screaming fast, and the new hot item for the hardcore enthusiast gamer (even though they're targeted at the workstation and server-class crowd). Intel will post some impressive clock speeds and the Pentium 4 will come into its own, but AMD's new architecture will ultimately perform better in real-world application performance.

No longer taking forever. *Duke Nukem Forever* will ship. Really this time. Honest. It'll be really good, but most people will say "what took so long?" It will not be the best action game of the year.

Well, that's about it for the crystal ball this year. Yeah, they're mostly pretty safe predictions, but that's the way I see next year: trends continuing, more refinement, no drastic risks. It'll be a rebound year for PC gaming, and those are usually great for gamers. That's when we see the most polished games, the most reasonable prices, and when new innovative (and risky) products are approved, for delivery a couple years down the road. ●

TIP OF THE MONTH

Run programs as administrator—In Windows 2000 and XP, some programs much be run by an administrator account to function properly, including many games. If your account isn't an administrator account, you can still run programs as the admin without even logging off, if you have the proper account name and password. Just hold down shift and right-click the shortcut to the program, then choose "Run As." A menu will open allowing you to run the program as any user—just type in the administrator name and password and you're good to go.

Q: In your December issue you have an article pertaining to the AMD vs. Intel fight. As is the norm you have proven my faith again in the AMD chip and steeled me to withstand the barrage of bullshit from my friends who refuse to see the Light, that is the Athlon. Nonetheless, there is an excerpt from the article: "machine built by Falcon Northwest ... two IBM 7200 RPM hard drives in a RAID 0 configuration, plugged into..." It's the RAID 0 configuration section that puzzles me. No one on the Internet, that mighty stockpile of info, the plethora of ideas, explains in great detail what the heck a RAID configuration is, specially in 0.

-Psiko

A: RAID stands for Redundant Array of Independent Disks. It's basically a method whereby several hard drives work together to provide a single volume of data. The different "levels" of RAID describe exactly how this happens. RAID 0 is what they commonly call "striping." What happens is that each hard drive stores an equal amount of the overall data, which is evenly split among them. So if you have two 40 GB drives, they work together to act like one 80 GB drive, and when you send data to the drive, half the data "blocks" go to one drive and half go to the other. RAID 0 is therefore often a lot faster than a single drive. After all each of the two hard drives are reading and writing half the data they normally would. It is possible to split the data up to more than two drives using RAID level 0, but it's not very common. The downside to RAID 0 is that if *either* of the drives fail, you effectively lose all your data on the other one, because only every *other* block of your data is on it.

Other types of RAID get more complicated. RAID level 1 is still very simple. Where 0 is striping (data split among multiple disks), 1 is mirroring (data duplicated among multiple disks). It doesn't really improve performance or storage space. If you have two 40 GB drives in a RAID 1 array, you still have only 40 GB of storage, but every block of data is written to both drives. The advantage is that if one drive fails, none of your data is lost. RAID 3 gets confusing—it requires 3 disks at a minimum, and it's just like RAID 0 (striping) except that one disk is reserved for parity info, which provides some fault-tolerance. RAID level 5 is just like 3, only the parity info is distributed among the various disks, instead of all stored on the same disk. There are other levels, RAID 7, RAID 10, and so on, but it only gets more confusing from there.

To make a long story short (I know, too late): RAID 0 in our machine meant using two hard drives that split the load between them to go faster.

Q: I just read the review of the XP OS. When you say that the Professional Edition of XP "supports two-processor systems," what does that mean? Does this mean I can go out and buy another processor and put it in my computer if I have XP Professional? Will it be a lot faster?

-Pat

A: Systems that use more than one processor are called SMP, or "symmetric multiprocessing" systems. The workload that your processor normally handles is split between all the processors in your system (usually only two for workstation or desktop systems, though servers may have as many as four or eight). But for this to work, you need several things. First, you need a computer that's built for more than one processor. That means a special motherboard—and if you have to even ask about dual-processor systems, trust me, you probably don't have one. So in your case, popping in a new processor is already out of the question. Second, you need an operating system that supports more than one processor. Windows XP Professional supports up to two, other more advanced versions of Windows XP support more, as does Linux. Third, you need applications that are written to take advantage of multiple processors. And when it comes to normal consumer applications, there aren't very many. Games that benefit from SMP systems are almost nonexistent.

There is some benefit to running a two-processor system even if you don't use programs made to take advantage of it, because most people run more than one application at a time when they aren't playing games, and a good operating system will run some of them on one processor and some on another. But by and large, you're much better off spending your money on a single fast processor.

TECHBYTES

The new iMac - At MacWorld this January, Steve Jobs unveiled the new iMac. A radical departure from the current design, everything is housed in a half-sphere base with a radius of only 10.5", which is connected via a sleek silver crane to a 15" LCD monitor with a resolution of 1024x768. The high-end model should already be shipping: it features an 800 MHz G4 processor, 256MB of RAM, a 60GB hard drive, and Apple's nifty SuperDrive (which burns both CD-RW and DVD-R discs). The price? A rather reasonable $1799. The midrange model drops the hard drive down to 40GB, the processor to 700 MHz, loses the SuperDrive in favor of a Combo Drive (DVD-ROM, CD-RW), and drops the price to $1499. It should be available late in February. A month later, the entry-level $1299 model should ship. It includes just 128MB of RAM, a regular CD-RW drive, and doesn't come with speakers. All the new iMac computers include 32MB GeForce2 MX graphics cards, use OS X as the default operating system, and are ready to connect to virtually anything with three USB ports, two FireWire ports, a 56k modem, and a 10/100 Ethernet jack.

Creative's Extigy – Cranitive Labs unveiled a new external sound card at the Consumer Electronics Show this year, dubbed the Extigy. It includes all the same basic features as the new Audigy card, minus the 1394 (FireWire) port. That means the same "EAX Advanced HD" audio processing, the same 5.1 audio output, the same 24bit 96 KHz sound quality with a signal-to-noise ratio of 100 dB. A sleek black and silver breakout box sits on your desk and provides all audio connections and volume controls, connecting to your PC only through the USB port. The Extigy will sell for a retail price of $149.

Toshiba's new 30 GB disc – Toshiba unveiled a new optical data format that uses an advanced blue laser to store 30 GB of data on one single-layer 150mm disc (the same size as a CD or DVD). The format is rewriteable, but it's really only in the prototype stage right now. There is no word yet on how much the drives or discs would cost, but blue laser technology isn't cheap, and the new disc format wouldn't enjoy the same economy of scale as CD-RW or even DVD-R/DVD-RAM discs. Still, 30 GB on a single rewriteable disc is pretty cool, huh? ■

Grand Gaming

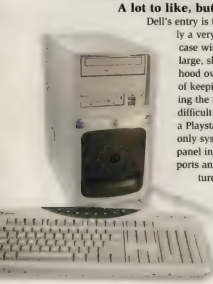
How much computer can you get for $1,000?

by Jason Cross

It seems whenever you're shopping for a new system, everything reviewed is a $4,000 monstrosity. Sure, they look cool and they fly like a bat out of hell, but you're looking for something a little more… frugal. We went to a bunch of PC manufacturers and asked them to build the best inexpensive PC for gaming. The rules were simple: everyone had the same deadline, at which time the complete system, with all applicable fees (save shipping), had to cost less than $1,000. Of course, since those looking to upgrade their computer on the cheap are often willing to re-use their current monitor and speakers, we told them to skip those and just send the main box, keyboard, and mouse.

Not everyone rose to the challenge. Companies like Falcon Northwest and Voodoo PC just don't make computers this inexpensive. Others, like Micron, sell sub-$1,000 systems, but don't want them evaluated as gaming machines. Four companies stepped up to the plate—two large-scale mainstream manufacturers (Dell and Gateway) and two smaller, enthusiast-oriented operations (Hypersonic PC and Alienware). The big guys both went with Pentium 4 systems using SDRAM, while the smaller outfits used Athlon XPs with DDR RAM. All systems carry a one-year warranty.

We ran the systems through a battery of game benchmarks, synthetic benchmarks, and timed them ripping a full CD and compressing a large video clip with the DivX codec. But speed isn't everything. If you're buying a computer on the cheap, value is just as important, and we take into account things like the size of the hard drive, type of CD or DVD drive, bundled software, and aesthetic concerns like the case, keyboard, and mouse.



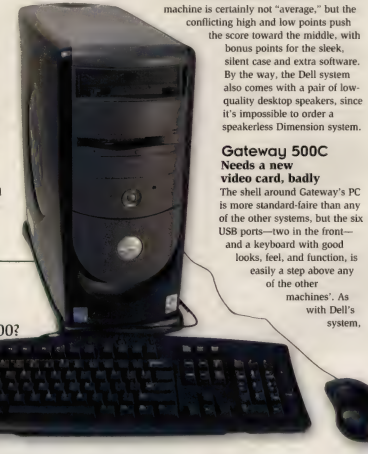
Dell Dimension 4300
A lot to like, but not for gamers

Dell's entry is the most conflicting of the four. It's really a very attractive system, with its small black case with gray accents. The only cooling is a large, slow-turning fan connected to an internal hood over the processor. This does a good job of keeping everything cool but a better job making the machine practically silent. In fact, it's difficult to tell if the computer is even running—a Playstation2 makes more noise. It's also the only system with a CD-RW drive. A flip-up panel in the front of the case hides two USB ports and a headphone jack, a pretty slick feature more manufacturers should adopt.

When it comes to software, Dell loads on more stuff than anyone else. Still stuck with a dialup connection? This is the only machine of the four to sport a 56k modem (albeit not a great one) in addition to the Ethernet card. Oh, and this rig is $100 under the bar, while everyone else is right at $1,000.

But when it comes to gaming, this machine sits at the bottom of the heap. Performance is hamstringed by a GeForce2 MX video card, and the mere 128MB of RAM doesn't help much either. The hard drive thrashed through the entire *Wolfenstietn* test. Dell wants $80 to upgrade to 256MB, which is an outlandish price for PC133 RAM and more than anyone else in our roundup charges.

This is one of those situations where a machine is certainly not "average," but the conflicting high and low points push the score toward the middle, with bonus points for the sleek, silent case and extra software. By the way, the Dell system also comes with a pair of low-quality desktop speakers, since it's impossible to order a speakerless Dimension system.



Gateway 500C
Needs a new video card, badly

The shell around Gateway's PC is more standard-faire than any of the other systems, but the six USB ports—two in the front—and a keyboard with good looks, feel, and function, is easily a step above any of the other machines'. As with Dell's system, there's plenty of software installed. There's no modem and the price is a little higher, but it has 256MB, a pretty quick DVD-ROM, and a fast hard drive.

Still, it suffers the same fatal flaw that the two gamer-oriented manufacturers don't: the GeForce2 MX 400 video card just isn't up to task on today's hottest games. Despite having the slowest processor in the roundup, it performed better in game benchmarks than the Dell system (blame it on the RAM), but it's still leagues behind the Alienware and Hypersonic systems.

It appears Gateway hasn't updated their standard Windows XP Home installation since they first started shipping systems with the OS. The NVIDIA drivers were hopelessly out of date and absolutely none of the updates from Windows Update had been applied. In fact, there's still a shortcut to Netscape Navigator at the top of the Start menu that doesn't work since Netscape isn't installed, which is a problem cited with the very first Gateway systems to ship with XP.

Gateway's machine is a little faster, and some of the components are better, but it's still not half the gaming rig as the Alienware or Hypersonic systems. A single video card upgrade would help with that, but then you're looking at spending another couple hundred bucks. It also doesn't have Dell's stylish and practically silent case or CD-RW drive. The balance comes out in the middle, again.

THE CONTENDERS

	Gateway 500C	Dell Dimension 4300	Hypersonic PC Sonic Fury SE	Alienware Aurora DDR SE
PRICE	$1019*	$899	$995	$999
PROCESSOR	1.5 GHz Pentium 4	1.6 GHz Pentium 4	Athlon XP 1500+	Athlon XP 1600+
MOTHERBOARD	Intel D845HV	Dell Intel 845 chipset	ASUS A7V266-E	Gigabyte GA7DX
RAM	256MB PC133	128MB PC133	256MB PC2100	256MB PC2100
HARD DRIVE	Seagate 40GB	IBM 40GB	Maxtor 20GBa	Seagate 40GB
VIDEO	GeForce 2 MX 400	GeForce 2 MX	GeForce 3 Ti 200	GeForce3 Ti 200
SOUND	Sound Blaster Live!	Turtle Beach Santa Cruz	SB Live X-Gamer Value	SB Live 5.1
NETWORK	Integrated 10/100 Ethernet	Intel Pro200WL 10/100 Ethernet	RealTek 10/100 Ethernet	Intel Pro100S 10/100 Ethernet
CD/DVD	Hitachi 16x DVD	LGE 10/16/40x CD-RW	Sony 52x CD	Pioneer 16x DVD
KEYBOARD	Gateway Multimedia Keyboard	Dell Multimedia Keyboard	Antec Windows98 Keyboard	Antec Windows98 Keyboard
MOUSE	Gateway-branded Logitech Wheel mouse	Dell-branded PS2 Intellimouse	USB Intellimouse	Alienware USB Intellimouse Explorer
SOFTWARE	AOL 6.0, WinDVD, PC Doctor, MusicMatch Jukebox, Microsoft Works, Microsoft Money	AOL 6.0, MS Works, Microsoft Money, Encarta, Norton Antivirus (90-day trial), MusicMatch Jukebox, Easy CD Creator, Dell Picture Studio	None	PowerDVD
UPSIDE	Six USB ports (two in front), fast DVD and hard drives, decent software package	Virtually silent, front-mounted USB and headphones, CD-RW drive, nice case, lots of software	Nice case, good cooling, fast processor/RAM/motherboard combination, fast video card.	Full-size case, fast processor, fast video card, good cooling, nice hard drive, nice DVD-ROM
DOWNSIDE	Slowest processor, GeForce2 MX 400 card holds it back	Slow video, only 128MB, slowest, sub-par game performance	Slow CD-ROM, small hard drive, no bundled software	Noisy, horrible keyboard, little included software
RATING	★★★	★★★½	★★★★	★★★★★

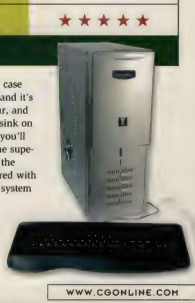
* Gateway shipped its system before our deadline. At shipping, the cost was $999. Two weeks later, when all of the prices of the systems were checked, the hard drive and RAM had each risen $10, putting it (barely) over the $1000 barrier.

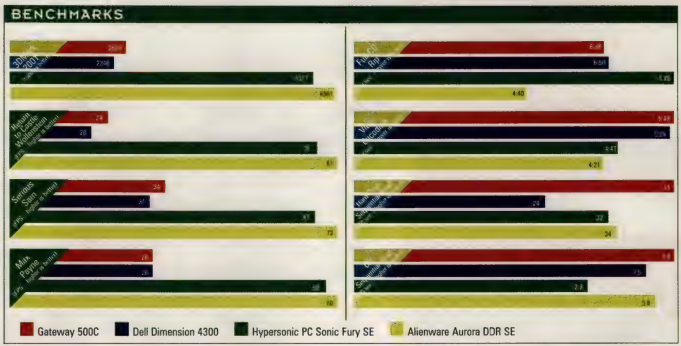
Hypersonic PC Sonic Fury SE

A good deal, but room for improvement

Honestly, this is the system that meets most expectations for a thousand dollar PC. It's pretty fast and has some nice components, but you can see where corners were cut to get the price down. For starters, the hard drive is only 20GB, half the size of that in the other three systems. The Sony 52x CD-ROM sounds fast but it's actually quite slow, and is chiefly responsible for the very long CD-ripping time. The keyboard and mouse are sub par. The standard USB Intellimouse isn't necessarily bad, but it's nothing to write home about, and the Antec keyboard is terrible. It feels cheap, has bad key action, and a terribly annoying key layout.

That's not to say that there's not a lot to love about Hypersonic's entry. The sleek silver Hydraulic brand case with its sliding front door is attractive, and it's cooled nicely with fans in the front, rear, and side. The Thermaltake aluminum heat sink on the CPU is just about the biggest thing you'll see in a case. Some may argue about the superiority of the Pentium 4 processor over the Athlon XP, but AMD's 1500+ chip paired with DDR memory easily beats a Pentium 4 system with SDRAM at this low price point. Hypersonic wisely chose a chip based on the new and improved "A" variant of the KT266 chipset from VIA, and the GeForce3 Ti 200 goes a long





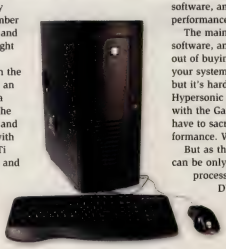
way toward kicking frame rates up. Hypersonic overclocked the video card from a stock 175 MHz with 400 MHz memory to 190 MHz with 430 MHz memory, further boosting performance.

It's pleasantly surprising how much computer Hypersonic offers for $1,000. Still, while there are no major issues with the machine, there is definitely room for improvement, particularly in the size of the hard drive and real-world performance of the CD-ROM drive.

Alienware Aurora DDR SE

It may be a cookie-cutter system, but what a cookie!

When first testing this system, it seemed like there was some kind of mistake. There was no way could such a rig cost only a grand. And after pricing an identical configuration online, it came up a couple hundred bucks over the limit. But this was with Alienware's normal configuration utility—when the company pointed us to the ordering page for the new SE model of their Aurora DDR line, it all made sense. This is certainly a $999 system, but the catch is that it's not customizable. Alienware cuts costs by building large batches of identical systems and offering them up cheap. You can't opt for a faster video card, bigger hard drive, or beefier processor—you'd have to make those upgrades on your own after buying the machine. One downside to this method is the potentially long waiting time; they wait until they have a certain number of orders before building a batch, and if yours is one of the first, you might wait 5 or 6 weeks for delivery.



The Aurora DDR SE ships with the fastest processor of our roundup, an Athlon XP 1600+, plugged into a Gigabyte GA7DX motherboard. The Seagate 40GB hard drive is large and fast enough to last awhile, and with 256MB of RAM and a GeForce3 Ti 200 overclocked to 200MHz core and 450MHz memory speeds, you won't need to upgrade anytime soon. The Plextor 16X DVD-ROM is fast and reliable, and a Sound Blaster Live 5.1 handles the audio. The whole shebang is enclosed in the same full-size Dragon tower case that the more expensive Alienware systems come with. There's even the full case fan treatment: two in the front, two in the back, and one on the side blowhole. But while it's good to have plenty of cooling, the thing sounds like it's about to take off.

Software is beyond light; PowerDVD is the only application included, but at least Windows was fully updated and the latest drivers were already installed. The only real downside, besides all the noise it makes, is the incredibly cheap Antec keyboard, identical to the one attached to the Hypersonic system.

Inexpensive, but not cheap

The final results were quite surprising. We initially thought the aggressive price point would level the playing field between the hardcore gamer-oriented companies and large-scale mainstream operations, but the opposite was true. The price/performance advantage of the Athlon XP processor and emphasis on video performance allowed the smaller guys to wipe the floor with the big manufacturers. The Dell and Gateway systems aren't bad at all—in fact they're quite good, for general PC users not concerned with game performance. They're well built, come with lots of software, and have good features, but they just don't offer the performance that a gamer needs.

The mainstream computer vendors seem to concentrate on software, and with many configurations don't allow you to opt out of buying programs like Works, Office, or AOL along with your system. This can be a good value if you need all that stuff, but it's hard to argue about the dominating speed of the Hypersonic and Alienware systems. What it boils down to is this: with the Gateway and Dell sub-$1,000 machines, you already have to sacrifice features in the hottest games to obtain good performance. With the other two, you're good to go for another year.

But as they say in that movie with all the bad sequels, "There can be only one." The winner is clearly Alienware. The extra processor speed, nicely overclocked video card, and quality DVD drive add up to a pretty amazing rig. It's truly shocking how much power they crammed into a $1,000 system. ●

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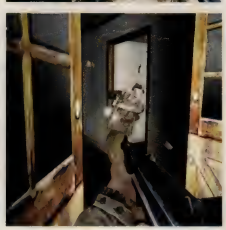


RATINGS

Extraordinary	★★★★★
Excellent	★★★★☆
Maybe	★★★☆☆
Mediocre	★★☆☆☆
Contemptible	★☆☆☆☆

(Clockwise from top left) The character models and textures are great, down to the thousand-yard stare. >>> The AI-controlled characters are believable, and actually competent. >>> Think fast, but shoot faster. >>> The interiors you fight in are supremely atmospheric.

Medal of Honor: Allied Assault

This WWII shooter lives up to the hype

by Robert Mayer

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

GENRE Military Shooter DEVELOPER 2015 [www.2015.com] PUBLISHER Electronic Arts [www.ea.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 500, 64MB RAM, 16MB 3D card MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players, Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

If you ever owned a PlayStation, chances are you tried the original *Medal of Honor*, a first-person shooter set in World War Two that registered on the realistic end of the action game spectrum. If you never got into consoles, chances are you at least heard about the game, because it and its sequel won a helmet full of awards. In either case, you probably also said to yourself, "damn, this would be such a killer PC game!"

You were right.

In 2015's well-crafted shooter, you play the role of Lieutenant Michael Powell, an American Ranger officer who manages to switch between covert operations, beach assaults, patrols, sabotage, and even tank command missions during the course of the single player game. You begin in North Africa, with the task of taking out German artillery covering an invasion beach. In subsequent multipart missions, you hit the highlights of Nazi sub pens in Norway, Omaha Beach, the Norman Bocage, ruined villages, picturesque German towns, secret factories and underground research centers. Each locale has several sections, covering different technical situations.

There's no carry-over between missions, and there's no story branching. Still, the missions themselves are well thought out, and offer extraordinary variety. In North Africa, after storming a town, rescuing a prisoner, and making your escape, you man the machine gun in the back of a jeep, strafing up an airfield. In France, you'll rescue a tank crew, capture a King Tiger tank, and then troll through a village infested with Nazi troops and Panzers. Some missions are straight up firefights, while others require a modicum of stealth, though as in most shooters killing everything that moves is always an option, and usually a good one. Most of the time, you'll find a use for all of your weapons, and success will require a judicious mix of fight, flight, and tactics. The enemy AI is good, though sometimes supernaturally accurate.

The good enemy AI is a godsend, because

Medal of Honor is first and foremost a game about combat. Luckily, that's where the game excels. The weapons feel superb, and are among the best ever featured in a real-world first-person shooter. The M1 Garand packs a wallop and has a satisfying sound and impact, while its 8-round clip that you have to exhaust before reloading is a welcome limitation. The Thompson SMG tosses enemies around like a rag-doll, but lacks range, while the 1903 Springfield sniper rifle is deadly accurate at range but terrifyingly slow in closer actions. You can pick up German weapons too, and you'll often find yourself using the MP40 SMG and, much later, the assault rifle. Grenades play a vital role as well, and you can use both Allied and German varieties. They bounce realistically, and have reasonable areas of effect. This isn't a wargame, though, so grognards will have to forgive the fudging here and there, like generic ammunition, health power-ups, and a rather durable character.

Redball Express

Unlike *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Medal of Honor* eschews zombies, the occult, cyborgs, and other sci-fi trappings. The secret weapons you encounter are all drawn more or less from history, and the Nazis you kill are all flesh and blood—and definitely not undead. There's always a danger that such verisimilitude can lead to stagnation and boredom, but that doesn't happen here. There are many different types of enemies, from Afrika Korps regulars to fresh-faced garrison troops, to steely paratroopers and vicious SS grenadiers. They speak in German, which adds immensely to the atmosphere, as do the authentic posters and magazines from the era, which make up some of the background scenery.

Your mission objectives are varied as well, ranging from your basic get from here to there tasking to stealing plans, blowing up guns, and freeing prisoners. Many of the missions include friendly forces beyond your control, and often they can be of some assistance. You can't kill them even if you try, though the enemy can, and in some cases you have to keep them alive to succeed. The game keeps you informed of your objectives, and rarely are you at a loss. You'll know, for instance, that you have to take out a machine gun nest, but working out how to go about it, and then finally doing it, is what makes *Medal of Honor* so entertaining. The only real puzzles are a couple of timing and navigation challenges towards the end of the game that are more annoying than entertaining.

The game offers a lot of things to do, and while there's a substantial amount of playtime here, it goes by fast because it's so much fun. Leading a squad down a Norman lane, then rounding a bend to come face to face with a burned-out German tank surrounded by SS Panzergrenadiers—that's entertainment. Engaging in a furious firefight complete with bazookas, machine-guns, grenades, and Tommy-gun assaults—that's adrenaline. Moments like this are everywhere in *Medal of Honor*, too, and that's what makes it so appealing. It really is, often, like you're in a WWII movie—a *good* war movie, too. Several locations seem ripped from *Saving Private Ryan*, while others pay homage to *Kelly's Heroes* and *The Dirty Dozen*, without ever being too derivative; the Spielberg influence is unsurprisingly strong, given that Dreamworks Interactive is the driving force behind the *Medal of Honor* series. True, you're always more or less channeled towards where you should be heading, but it rarely *feels* like you're being herded along. The illusion of expansiveness holds throughout most of the game.

Arsenal of Democracy

Medal of Honor uses the *Quake III* graphics engine, and it lives up to its visual heritage. The entire game has a subdued, muted look, appropriate for mid-20th century Europe at war, but one that seems a trifle understated when compared to that other *Quake III*-fueled Nazi shooter, *Wolfenstein*. The more you play, though, the more you see that the textures are excellent and the attention to detail is impressive, with particularly excellent vehicles and weapon treatments. Character models are superb, as is their animation, and special effects like fire, smoke, snow and rain are also well done. Sound is particularly wonderful, in keeping with the award-winning pace set by earlier console games in this series.

D-Day, the 6th of June, and you are there, man, you are *there*.

Framerates, however, aren't up there with *Wolfenstein* or similar "pure" shooters. You also are usually dealing with a fair number of actors on screen at once, counting all of the friendly and enemy characters mucking about, and that has to contribute to the slow downs. It's never really bad, and you can tweak the graphic settings and get a good looking and fast-moving image with only a little effort. You will still be better off with a PC well above the game's minimum requirements.

Mechanically, the game is almost perfect, with dead-on shooting and precise controls. You almost never get hung up on geometry, and collision detection is razor sharp. The only things you can't do, which you should be able to, are to go prone and lean around corners; in a game that focuses on quasi-realistic combat, the inability to hit the dirt is a bit disconcerting, and you can lean in multiplayer games, but not solo. Like most new shooters, you have to reload your weapons, which takes precious time, and switching weapons isn't instantaneous either. Luckily, the enemy seems to be constrained by the same needs, as you'll often get into tense situations where you and a foe are racing to reload your weapons—or at least, that's what it looks like. Whatever the reality, the impression you get while playing the game is of fast-paced, realistic WWII firefights, and the adrenaline rush of trying to reload before a German pops around the corner of the building in front of you is intense.

The Great Crusade

Where *Medal of Honor* falters a bit is in its multiplayer offerings. While the non-deathmatch game types are fun, the lack of an in-game Internet browser and the reliance on GameSpy Arcade for finding servers is annoying, and the need to exit and restart the game in order to change weapons is a pain. This is primarily a single-player game, however, and in that respect it is about as good as a shooter can be. It's radically different from, say, *Half-Life*, because it's mission-based and episodic rather than seamless and continuous, but it's almost as well crafted and polished in its own way. Storming Omaha Beach, dueling snipers in a bombed-out village, or creeping through a snowy German border town on a winter's night—these are experiences that transcend mere gameplay and start to become drama.

UPSIDE	Exciting, atmospheric, intense WWII action
DOWNSIDE	Annoying multiplayer lapses, inability to go prone
RATING	★★★★½

The new Iron Trow unit can kill multiple units with one swing.

bizarre lapse appears when Trow and Ogres, the two beefiest units in the game, engage in silent battle. The crunching of Trow hammers and the clanging of Ogre weapons were not only omitted from the original release, but also were not fixed in later patches (as of version 1.02).

Slip-ups of this nature are actually quite common in the game. As a result, it has a rough and unpolished feel that clearly sets it apart from its Bungie-produced brethren. These troubles range from the pesky (silly typos in the introductions, and reinforcements that are not the proper color on the overhead map) to the glaring (no support for direct IP play, and woefully unbalanced multiplayer maps).

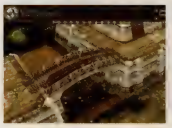
In the game's initial release, multiplayer was in shambles. Upon joining, a prolonged stream of meaningless server information that pushed chat off-screen assaulted you. The font color made it almost impossible to read the list of available games. A bug in the buddy system made it possible for anyone to crash any other user. Cooperative play was effectively impossible, given that a victory in one mission would not open up the next. Some of these problems have been patched, others have not (check the official website for the latest fixes). The damage has already been done, however—put off

Myth III: The Wolf Age

All spruced up but no one to talk to

by Dave Perkins

GENRE Real-time Strategy DEVELOPER Mumbo Jumbo [www.mumbojumbogames.com] PUBLISHER Take Two Interactive [www.godgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 96MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; Internet; LAN ESRB Mature



Structures are more complex than ever. >>> The cut scenes are hideously ugly, and lack the unique style of the previous games.

Four years ago, this publication crowned Bungie's *Myth: The Fallen Lords* Game of the Year, praising its realistic physics, clever level design, and creative multiplayer modes. A couple of years later, Bungie released *Myth II: Soulblighter*, which introduced more detailed terrain, more frames of animation, and new units and maps, while essentially keeping the tactical gameplay the same. Now nestled under Microsoft's wing, Bungie has turned its attentions to the console arena, giving developer Mumbo Jumbo a crack at this third installment in the series. Despite its much-ballyhooed move from 2D sprites to 3D units and a dramatic new lighting model, this game mostly adds more of the same… unless you count the bugs, broken features, and unpolished gameplay. Those are all new to the series. Hooray.

The plot takes you back in *Myth's* timeline to a shaken-up world of conflicts, the kind where the peasants really take it on the chin. Ghols battle dwarves, Ogres rebel against the Trow, and men combat an amalgam of dark, sinister races. Hardly a region in the land remains unstained by the time the solo campaign concludes. The story unfolds via narrated mission introductions; the missions themselves are quite similar to those found in the other two games. Mumbo Jumbo has done a great job catching that elusive *Myth* atmosphere, however, and several missions feature the best environments and sound in the series to date. The series is well known for its sound and music, and this game continues—and enhances—that tradition. Archers release arrows with a crisper thrum, Trow pound their feet with a more resonant thud. One by bugs and broken gameplay, the online community's population has sharply declined. If you are looking for the multiplayer magic of *Myth* games past, you won't find it here.

Mumbo Jumbo did get the visuals right, at least—the new units, models, and lighting are superb. The atmosphere of the single-player levels is clearly improved over the earlier games in the series. Interior environments are more numerous, and more moody and creepy. The designers use structures such as temples, altars, and archways to great effect, and the plants look real enough to water.

The mission scripting shows little creativity, however. It is almost as if Mumbo Jumbo felt bound to an outline defined by the earlier games—the same old defend-the-gates missions, avoid-the-patrol missions, rescue-the-captive missions, and missions that involve only hero characters. Only two enemy unit types (Wights and Forgotten) display even rudimentary AI; most enemy units simply attack head-on, in timed waves. Battles are quite predictable: you are typically either prepared or overwhelmed. The controlled chaos and frenzy that were the hallmarks of the first two games are in short supply here.

UPSIDE	Great-looking 3D units and lighting, still the same terrific tactical feel
DOWNSIDE	Multiplayer community dwindling, not much novelty in the solo campaign, generally rough and unpolished
RATING	★★½

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Title Fight 2001 vs. World Championship Boxing Manager

Two text-based boxing sims go head to head in a battle royale

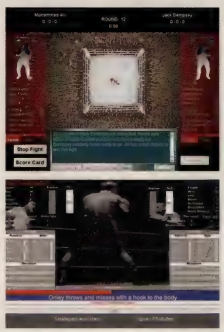
by Jeff Lackey

Perhaps because of the deterioration of the sport in real life (quick—name the heavyweight champ of the world), most big software publishers are ignoring boxing on the PC. To simulate the sweet science on your computer today, your choices boil down to a couple of text sims: *Title Fight 2001* and *World Championship Boxing Manager*.

You might think it a simple matter to put these two games in the ring together to see which one emerges the champ, but they actually have surprisingly little in common. Each emphasizes different aspects of the boxing world. *Title Fight 2001* focuses on the action inside the ropes, and does so in exquisite detail. It offers a huge selection of fighters (men and women) from every era, from the Greatest (Ali) to the Palookas (Butterbean). What really make this game a boxing aficionado's dream are the minutiae that only a true fan can appreciate. You choose the stage of the boxer's career—prime, beginning, end, over the hill—and his condition. Did he party too much before the fight? Is he in prime shape? Overweight? Select from a large list of active and retired stat based corner men. History has shown that judges can make a huge difference in the outcome of a close fight, so you get to pick your three judges, again from a large list of stat based real judges, and set their biases. You can also choose between retired and active fight officials. Want to see Judge Mills Lane off of the bench and back in the ring?

Fights are single bouts, full fight cards, or bracketed tournaments. Once in the ring, you set the fighters' strategy and then watch the fight unfold via a radio style text commentary. One significant drawback: you have to set the strategy for both boxers, robbing you of the "fog of war" of not knowing the enemy's strategy. The stat model of the fighters is superb: Ali dances and plays with his opponents before unleashing his amazing power, while LaMotta is an animal in the ring. Unfortunately there's no career option, but if you want to set up the fights of your dreams, *Title Fight 2001* is your ringside seat.

World Championship Boxing Manager is an entirely different beast. This game is all about managing a stable of fighters in the boxing world—a world in which struggling fighters of average talent try to work their way up the ladder, managers cajole other managers to agree to a bout with offers of cash, top level fighters hope for a title shot against the champ, and those wearing the championship belt deciding which challenges to accept and



All has Dempsey on the ropes in Title Fight 2001. >>> While World Championship Boxing Manager focuses on the management aspects of boxing, the actual bouts are very entertaining.

which to avoid. As a new manager with no reputation, you put together a stable of fighters from the mix of real (current and historic) and generated fighters. You'll start with low-level fighters and rookies, train them, and wheel and deal in attempts to land fights that will move them up the ladder. If you're wise and shrewd, your guys will move up, adding to your prestige and cash, and allowing you to attract better fighters to your camp.

The game is tough, but in a good way. Ali, Tunney, Hagler, Leonard, and Frazier are fighting it out in the same world as the Joe Schmoes and Bob Schmucks that you are managing. Success at first may be simply getting someone into the top 25 rankings. *World Championship Boxing Manager* is an older sim, and it shows in the interface—there are quirks and inefficiencies that, while not crippling, make playing that game more awkward than it should be (according to the developer an updated version, free to current users, should be available by the time you read this). But when you pick up that one fighter in a 1000 and shepherd him into contention for a title, there's a great sense of accomplishment that is unique to a good career based sim.

Comparing these two boxing sims is like comparing two different weight class fighters—they really don't compete head to head. Choose Title Fight 2001 for the most meticulous simulation of the action in the ring, and World Championship Boxing Manager for living the career of a fight manager. If only these two companies would merge their programs, boxing fans would have the best of all worlds. Until then, if you are a true boxing fanatic you will want to own both.

Title Fight 2001

GENRE Sports **DEVELOPER** Comp-U-Sports [www.boxmag.com] **PUBLISHER** Comp-U-Sports [www.boxmag.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 166, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

UPSIDE	Boasts a superb in-ring fight engine and enough detail to please the most avid fight fan
DOWNSIDE	Lacks a career mode
RATING	★★★★½

World Championship Boxing Manager

GENRE Sports **DEVELOPER** World of Boxing News and Software [www.worldofboxing.com] **PUBLISHER** World of Boxing News and Software [www.worldofboxing.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 166, 16MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

UPSIDE	Pulls you into an immersive career mode
DOWNSIDE	Interface is clunky and at times frustrating
RATING	★★★½

The overland map is highly detailed and pleasing to the eye, as is the rest of the game.

Etherlords

Heroes of the Gathering

by William Abner

GENRE Turn Based Strategy DEVELOPER Nival Interactive [www.nival.com] PUBLISHER Fishtank Interactive [www.fishtankgames.de] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

You have to hand it to Russian developer Nival Interactive—it keeps plugging away in spite of a series of near misses. From the *Rage of Mages* series to *Evil Islands*, the company couldn't seem to find its niche, but *Etherlords* is far and away its best effort to date. This visually stunning turn-based game takes bits and pieces from *Heroes of Might and Magic* and the insanely popular *Magic: The Gathering* collectible card game and blends the two into a cohesive product that is as addictive as any turn-based game on the market. But there's a catch. The campaigns are exceedingly difficult—so difficult they diminish the attraction of the game's solid mechanics.

The gameplay is reminiscent of *Heroes of Might and Magic*. There are several items on the game map, such as resources, artifacts, rune sellers, spell towers, and so on. Different resources are required for certain spells, with "ether" being the most important. Ether is like mana—it's a mage's lifeblood. You need runes to cast advanced spells—without them a spell is useless—and runes are used up each time you cast. So if you have five runes to support your Gibberling Instigator spell, you may cast it five times before having to replenish your rune supply.

The overland portion of the game is comfortably familiar, but the combat, in the form of a mage duel, is where the game truly shines. There's a lot of strategy involved, as well as a lot of randomness. Each hero (all heroes are mages) has a "deck" of spells at his or her disposal. Each round, a maximum of five spells are available. The odds of a particular spell appearing in your "hand" depend on how many copies of that spell are in your spell deck. So if you have five copies of "Summon Tick Warrior" and only one copy of "Summon Ariak Assassin" the odds are much greater of the tick warrior appearing in a given round.

You can use all the spells in your hand as long as you have ether available, but you may choose not to cast anything in order to save up for your more powerful spells that require a lot of ether to cast. Spells range from basic monster summoning and combat modifiers to advanced castings that destroy everything in sight or remove cards from your opponent's hand.

There is a vast array of spells available for each of the four races (over 300 in all), and here is where a lot of the strategy lies. Compiling the right deck is the key to victory. Too many ultra powerful, ether eating spells and you may never get a chance to use them. The number of deck variations is limitless, and experimenting with new ideas and tactics is a heck of a lot of fun.

Combat itself is equally thought provoking. Using the right spell and the right time is critical, as is deciding when to send a creature into battle. Do you attack or do you use your creature(s) to block the enemy's henchmen? It's important to note that your hero never engages in hand-to-hand combat, it's his job to summon attackers and cast offensive or defensive spells.

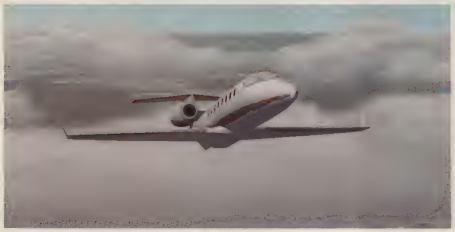
While the game's mechanics are wonderful, the stage on which you play is not. The two campaigns are laughably difficult, even on the easiest setting. Right off the bat, the missions are tough, and the game stacks the deck (pun intended) in the CPU's favor. You're constantly outgunned and outnumbered. This seems to be intentional, since the enemy hero AI is woefully underdeveloped, but Nival has dramatically overcompensated. Reloading game after game after game until you figure out the proper way to complete a mission get tedious.

Die, Orc Shaman, die!

Aside from the campaigns, you get a meager number of standalone scenarios (10), and the option to duel with the AI. Duels forego the overland portion of the game and focus solely on combat. This is a great way to experiment with different deck ideas.

Etherlords is a fabulous game design with nowhere to go. The way in which it plays is top-notch, but with so few standalone scenarios, masochistic campaigns, and no map editor or random map generator, it leaves you with little to do.

UPSIDE	Gameplay is addictive as all get out, superb graphics and animation, mage duels steeped in strategic decisions
DOWNSIDE	So-so gameplay, campaign far too difficult, no map editor, no random maps, too few single battle scenarios
RATING	★★★½☆



Emerging from the clouds in your corporate jet.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Flight Simulator 2002

Enjoy flight without the fight

by Jeff Lackey

GENRE Simulation PUBLISHER Microsoft [www.microsoft.com] DEVELOPER Microsoft [www.microsoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; Internet, LAN, Modem ESRB Everyone

Try shooting an IFR landing approach at a busy airport like O'Hare. At night. In a thunderstorm. While flying a huge Boeing 747 filled with a couple of hundred virtual passengers that trust their lives to your skills. See if that gets your adrenaline pumping. Or landing a Cessna 208 Caravan amphibious aircraft on an isolated Alaskan lake protected by steep mountains on all sides. See how tense you get when you fly your sailplane over the ocean, lose all of your lift, and have to find a pocket of hot air before you come crashing into the drink. It's a different kind of excitement, but *Flight Simulator 2002* excels in providing something for anyone who has any interest at all in flying civilian aircraft.

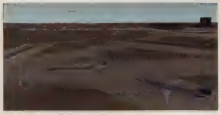
This isn't a game—it's a simulation. In addition to the planes mentioned above, you can fly large passenger jets (the 737 and the 777), the Cessna 172S Skyhawk SP, 182S Skylane and Skylane RG, the sleek and sophisticated Learjet 45, the acrobatic Extra 300S, and for a blast from the past, the Sopwith Camel. Cockpits for each aircraft are extremely accurate, and more than eye candy: every button and switch is live and does what it does in the real plane. Virtual cockpits allow you to seamlessly scan the sky—an elegant and useful feature (not all the planes have virtual cockpits, however). The world's airspace is your playground, with over 21,000 airports from around the globe to visit, from major airports to local municipal fields and grass strips. Detailed ground features are included for most major population centers, and a feature called "autogen" creates buildings, trees, lakes, etc. on the fly for less populated areas. The aircraft and terrain graphics are superb, yet frame rates are as good or better than *Flight Simulator 2000* from two years ago.

The sim is filled to the brim with details that belie the developers' obvious love of aviation. Weather is a huge factor in real life aviation—the most common cause for aviation accidents is Visual Rated pilots venturing into Instrument Rated conditions (i.e. bad weather), and the game will load the current actual weather conditions from the Internet for that extra edge of realism.

The interactive Air Traffic Control system creates a lively, believable environment. Start your flight on the ground at an airport, and the ATC will direct you to taxi to a certain location where you will be required to hold your position while other planes of all types take off and land on the runway (unfortunately, there is only one active runway per airport). The full ATC hand-off procedure is modeled, from taxiing to take-off to leaving the airport's flight space. On the other side of the flight it grants you permission to land, directs you to the current landing pattern, and then tells you where to taxi your plane.

Taxiing is a bit more taxing than it should be because of the inexplicable lack of taxi and runway signs, but you can toggle on a visual aid (a purple line) that shows the route you have to take. The airwaves are filled with ATC commands to all of the planes in your airspace. You can create flights as simple as jumping into a Cessna and taking off for a VFR flight around the countryside, or as complex as commanding a jumbo jet and filing a full IFR cross-country flight plan, with ATCs directing you each step of the way. The only thing lacking is the ability to declare an emergency to the ATC and the ability to change a filed flight plan during flight.

It's hard to think of anything that you might want to do in civilian flight that you can't do here. You can take flight lessons and be virtually certified all the way from a casual private VFR license to a commercial ticket, enjoy the almost Zen-like relaxation of piloting a glider quietly over mountains in Hawaii, practice IFR flight at night in a Lear jet, sky-write your sweetie's name in smoke over the San Francisco skyline in your Extra acrobatic, or just enjoy a beautiful day flying a biplane over your neighborhood from one grass strip to another, all with amazing accuracy and realism. *Flight Simulator 2002* is an incredible piece of software, and one that belongs on the hard drive of anyone who's ever dreamed of flying.



The skies and taxiways are filled with aircraft. >>> ATC has positioned your Lear jet for takeoff and handed you off to the tower.

UPSIDE	An enormous variety of planes, interactive ATC system and AI flights, as much realism as you can get without strapping into a real cockpit
DOWNSIDE	A few ATC problems, not all of the planes have a virtual cockpit, lack of taxiway signs
RATING	★★★★½

Sure it glows, but will it replace my Ginsu knives?

Soul Reaver 2

Wordiness and repetition sink a sequel

by Brett Todd

GENRE Action/Adventure DEVELOPER Crystal Dynamics [www.eidos.com]
PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive [www.eidos.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM ESRB Mature

Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* orders writers to "omit all unnecessary words." Those are words to live by, and the designers at Crystal Dynamics would have done well to follow them. The team that developed *Soul Reaver 2* took an intriguing saga and weighed it down with so much dialogue and so many confusing plot points that even David Lynch would be hard-pressed to wade through it. In nearly every instance, scriptwriter Amy Hennig chose to waste a thousand words on something that could have been explained in no more than a dozen. As a result, what's supposed to be a fast-paced game with puzzles in the *Tomb Raider* vein drags like a lecture on economics. It's a mere shadow of the original, which was one of the better action/adventures for the PC and PlayStation in 1999.

Hmm, there's my answer.

Constant, lengthy interruptions are the biggest problem. The story is interesting enough, but it falls flat in the telling. The tale opens immediately after the premature conclusion of *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver*, with your avenging vampiric warrior Raziel finally confronting his evil arch-nemesis, Kain. Unfortunately, this confrontation consists of nothing but choice invectives spread out over nearly ten minutes. When it finally ends, another ten-minute conversation immediately commences. And so it goes for much of the game. Sitting through these long-winded expository passages (that can't be skipped) will take up at least two hours of your time from start to finish. That's a mighty long stretch, since the total length of the game is no more than twelve hours or so.

The outstanding premise and the first-rate voice acting help make the expository sequences more bearable. A little. Hennig's dialogue is mostly top-notch, and the experienced team of character actors bring her words to life admirably. Most series veterans have returned, including Tony Bell as Raziel, Simon Templeman as Kain, and Tony Jay as the Elder God. All lend texture to their roles, particularly Jay and Templeman, whose voices resonate with menace. A similarly understated musical score underlines the spoken word. Still, the whole thing is just too long-winded. Cut scenes bookend every few minutes of action, halting your progress to recount what's just been accomplished or provide unnecessary clues. There's no sense of drama accompanying any of this. Even worse, there's no payoff in the end… unless you enjoy cliffhangers.

It plays much like the first game. Raziel continues to shift between the material and spectral realms, restores himself by consuming the souls of vanquished foes, solves "puzzles" by moving large objects, save his progress only at designated platforms, and uses the ever-powerful Soul Reaver and a host of other weapons to kill the bad guys. He even slays them in the same fashion, with a satisfying beheading or an impalement trick that's textbook Vlad Tepes.

If you got your fill the first time through, be warned that this might feel like more of the same. If you didn't, then you'll probably take issue with some of the game's more glaring problems. Save platforms are separated by as much as a thirty minutes of play, mostly thanks to those unending dialogue sequences. Monster variety is limited, and the game is devoid of the bosses that gave *Soul Reaver* some of its character. Combat is repetitive hack and slash against the same villains, over and over again. There isn't even the interesting element of slaying vampires, since in contrast to the previous game, your foes here are generally humans and monsters that bite the dust without so much as a stake or torch to help them along. Level design remains seamless, with no loading times, but everything is so sprawling that it's often difficult to tell exactly where to go next. You also have to do a lot of backtracking to move the plot along, and your route is often confused by rough textures and recurrent architecture. Going from Point A to Point B isn't made any easier by the muddy color palette, which mutes the otherwise attractive visuals.

Hmmmmm, souls...

Like so many second-rate movies and novels, *Soul Reaver 2* could have benefited greatly from the attentions of a good editor. The raw materials for a very good game are all here. The very good game isn't.

UPSIDE	Good dialogue, impaling your foes never gets old
DOWNSIDE	Overwritten, little monster variety, too few save points
RATING	★★½☆☆

AquaNox

More fun than Archimedes in a bathtub?

by Adam Fleet

GENRE Action DEVELOPER Massive Development [www.massive.de]
PUBLISHER Fishtank Interactive [www.fishtankgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; Internet, LAN
ESRB Teen

From the first mission to the last, and most of the ones in between, you'll be protecting things like this freighter.

Action games come in lots of different shapes and sizes. You've got your shooters, your hack-and-slashers, your fliers and drivers, and everything in-between. Some games—*AquaNox*, for example—seem like they were made up of leftover game parts and assembled in total darkness by a team of deranged, acid-dropping monkeys. It's sort of a space shooter, but underwater, with an assimilating technological menace making a comeback, a political power struggle with no good solutions, and a horrible ancient evil just waiting to be released upon the unsuspecting populous of a civilization that lives on the bottom of the sea. What's really crazy is that, oddly enough, it ain't half bad.

Blonts, the baddies from Archimedean Dynasty, are back for more. >>> Green never looked so good.

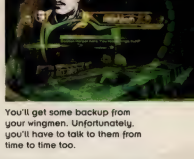
The story takes place in the world of Aqua, a futuristic civilization that has been forced to live entirely underwater after a nuclear war melted the polar ice caps and left the surface dangerously irradiated. Much of the background information in this sequel to Massive's last weird underwater game, *Archimedean Dynasty*, is disseminated through terrible cut scenes that feature the most dispassionate reading since Harrison Ford's infamous *Blade Runner* voiceover. The rest of the developing drama comes through conversations that you're forced to endure between missions. There is an illusion of choice, but all you can really do is go down the list of people available at your current locale and wade through horrendous dialog sprinkled with important information. When you are finished, you move on to the next mission. Some of it is interesting, but mostly you just want to skip it and start blasting.

Ah, yes. The blasting. That's what you signed up for, right? The "meat and potatoes" of *AquaNox* is the story mode, where you play through a linear campaign of missions as the tough-talking mercenary Emerald "Dead-eye" Flint. There is some pretty significant submarine ass-whuppin' to be done once you get into it, although a bit more variety would have made it better. Too many of the missions are protection runs—taking out some enemies before they take out someone or something that you're not supposed to let them take out. The action is entertaining enough, falling somewhere between space sim and first person shooter (think *Descent*). The subs that you pilot can even strafe, albeit slowly. You earn money by completing missions, and you'll slowly save up the cash that you need to upgrade your weapons and buy more powerful ships.

Unfortunately, the lack of variety doesn't stop with the game's mission design. Multiplayer, which consists of only Capture the Flag and Deathmatch, feels tacked on. The Instant Action modes are less than satisfying. It's all about options, or the lack thereof. You can play standalone duels, skirmishes, and the like, but without any way to select your ship, weapons, or opposition, these gameplay modes offer only a brief and barely satisfying diversion.

AquaNox makes up for its lack of mission variety and gameplay options in presentation. It's stunningly beautiful to look at, if you can swing the hefty system requirements. The game's environments are spectacular, with brilliant lighting and particle effects that make the underwater world seem eerily real. Whether you are traversing a sea-floor canyon or a field of gigantic power-generating turbines, there is always something amazing to gaze at when you can spare a moment from blowing bad guys into fish food. Even the water is uncannily… watery… from crystal clear greens and blues to the murky soup of an embattled junkyard. The in-game audio also adds to the fun. The soundtrack spices up the action with emphatic techno styling, and the sound effects (unlike the voice acting) are very nicely done.

When all is said and done, *AquaNox* manages to be a strangely entertaining little game, even if it doesn't quite measure up to it's highly underrated predecessor *Archimedean Dynasty*. The action is fast and fun, though the excessive babysitting can be frustrating at times, and the visuals are absolutely gorgeous. If you can choke down the annoying dialog, the plot (such as it is) is weirdly interesting. A lack of peripheral options hurts *AquaNox* a bit, but for the action fan interested in something slightly different, it's worth a peek.



You'll get some backup from your wingmen. Unfortunately, you'll have to talk to them from time to time too.

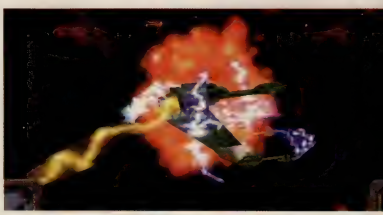
UPSIDE	Spectacular graphics, something different
DOWNSIDE	Too many protection missions, lack of extras
RATING	★★★½☆

Star Trek Armada II

The wrath of micromanagement

by Andrew S. Bub

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER Mad Doc Software [www.maddocsoftware.com] PUBLISHER Activision [www.activision.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone



A Klingon having some equipment problems.

Star Trek Armada is an elegant real-time strategy game that didn't try to do too much. It aimed for simple gameplay and successfully melded the *Star Trek* theme with the standard real-time strategy model. It cleverly incorporated classic *Trek* concepts, weapons, and races without feeling forced, and it had decent multiplayer options. Unfortunately, it was saddled with truly awful single player AI—especially in Instant Action mode. It also had more than its fair share of show-stopping bugs. Underneath those problems was a very promising game, however, and developer Mad Doc software has done a great job fixing what was wrong with the original. Then they went and added a bunch of new problems that bring the whole thing back to square one.

Taking on the Borg.

The first game was about mining Dilithium crystals from blue moon-like objects, setting up defenses, building a fleet, researching special weapons, and then whomping your enemies. *Armada II* takes those mechanics and expands upon them. Now you need to mine metal from asteroids, latinum (money) from special yellow nebulae, and officers from captured planets. Money is used for research, metal, and crew. Dilithium gets you ships and stations. You also need to build trading stations and manage where your trade ships go. These stations will let you trade latinum for dilithium or metal and sell off your surplus to passing Ferengi freighters. Research allows for brand new ship types with special abilities and to research special weapons. They've also added a *Homeworld*-style Z-axis to their new true 3D engine, which lets you set up formations by pressing the Shift key and placing them up or down from the zero position. Also, most ships can warp around the map, stretching out visually, as they do in the show, and traveling large distances much faster than before.

The problem isn't that these new concepts are broken; most of them work as intended (particularly the now very complex resource model). Micromanagement fans will enjoy these changes; however, if you liked the streamlined feel of the original game, you'll be disappointed. The new Z-axis ability (and the formations, for that matter) adds nothing meaningful to the game aside from an extra layer of complexity. Ships in formation don't hold it when combat ensues, and being higher or lower than your target doesn't provide any advantage aside from annoying the other players, who will have to zoom in to see the tiny ships below and zoom out from the giant (relatively speaking) ships in the foreground. The Caps Lock key allows you to view the game in 3D, but it's almost impossible to give orders in this view, so you end up playing in the familiar top-down 2D grid most of the time.

For a game that's still supposed to be about combat, ships are very fragile. It's distressing to see five giant Galaxy class starships, each carrying hundreds of humans, blow up in a matter of seconds. Apparently everybody aboard these vessels wears a red shirt. It's a significant shift from the first game, where losing just a couple capital ships was usually devastating to your force. In the first *Armada* you had to employ hit, run, and repair tactics. Here, ships and crew are expendable. That's a notion alien to *Star Trek*.

The single player portion of the game features an effective but dull-as-dishwater tutorial and three 10-mission campaigns that tell the same story from three sides. At first, only the Federation side of the story is available. Success unlocks the Klingons and finally the Borg. Other *Trek* races such as the Cardassians, Romulans, and *Voyager's* creepy Borg-hating Species 8472 make appearances in the campaigns and are available in both multiplayer and Instant Action modes. The stories are much less clichéd than the original game's "ripped from the shows" motif.

Given the epic scope and the gorgeous visuals, it's a shame that so much extra micromanagement was thrown in and so much of the balance and *Trek*-ness was crowded out. Much of *Armada II* feels like busywork, and that distracts you from what should be the game's main subject matter: an armada of *Star Trek* vessels trading torpedoes and phaser blasts in real-time.

UPSIDE	Improved graphics, more cohesive storyline, better AI
DOWNSIDE	Ineffective 3D, too much micromanagement, ships too fragile
RATING	★★½☆☆

Gothic

Depth and detail make this a role-playing game to remember

by Brett Todd

GENRE Role-playing DEVELOPER Piranha Bytes[www.piranha-bytes.com] PUBLISHER Xicat Interactive [www.xicat.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

Gothic is a tremendous achievement. The third-person fantasy epic from German development house Piranha Bytes features a realm so alive that it should have a pulse. Elaborate story, dialogue, and characterization draw you into one of the most believable role-playing game worlds ever created. Although there are some issues regarding the initial learning curve and a problematic interface, few games reward your patience as this one does. If you are willing to put up with a few quirks, you can look forward to many satisfying hours in an engrossing fictional world.

Your adventures take place in the kingdom of Myrtana, recently united by King Rhotbar II. He desperately needs weapons to fight an army of orcs, and has ordered all criminals to be shipped to the ore mines. Wizards magically seal the area to keep the criminals in, but something goes wrong and the wizards end up trapped with the convicts. You enter the scene as an unnamed prisoner condemned to work in the mines. The only difference between you and the average Joe is a last-minute reprieve... if you can deliver a mysterious note to the trapped wizards.

The game's opening moments are confusing, as you're tossed through the magical barrier with no knowledge of what awaits you, or even a rundown of your character's capabilities. Strength, dexterity, and mana skills are developed as you earn experience points and gain levels, as are talents with weapons, thieving, and magic. The game doesn't offer much handholding to help you with the basics, and poor controls make things even more awkward. The third-person view is typical of action/adventurer games, but actions that are governed by pressing key combinations rather than single keys takes time to get used to. The real-time combat has an arcade feel; you need to do more than simply click your mouse *Diablo*-style to battle enemies, which is either a good thing or a bad thing depending on your tastes. Unfortunately the interface also makes rudimentary tasks such as climbing ladders and initiating conversations more difficult than they should be. Menu screens and inventory tasks that you must navigate with the keyboard are similarly frustrating.

The detailed environment presents more of a hurdle, at least at first. You're given few clues on how to get going other than instructions to go directly to the Old Camp—good advice, since you start off as weak as a kitten. Things get more confusing once you arrive. There are dozens of people in and around the fortifications, and with little guidance on how to deliver your letter you need to engage almost all of them in conversation. Getting through this tedious process is a blessing in some ways, however, as it reveals the depth of the game world. Nearly every non-player character has a distinct personality, and your goal here is to build a network of supporters. To move up in the camp hierarchy, you need to complete assignments. Make the middle-management types happy and they'll support you with the bosses. Fail them and they won't. Rivalries and friendships both within and between three different camps make things more complex. Currying the favor of one person or faction can get you into trouble with another.

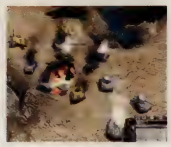
After struggling through some faltering baby steps, *Gothic* develops into a rich role-playing experience. Realism is paramount, from the need to make friends to having to get a good night's sleep in your hut. Forging alliances opens up quests that allow you to further develop your character, earn ore currency, and purchase ever-more powerful weapons, armor, and magical items. Monsters include role-playing standards such as goblins and the undead, along with more esoteric foes such as the dinosaur-like snapper. All of this is brought to life with 3D graphics that are attractive, if still a little blockier than the most advanced current releases. The game makes good use of what it has, however, with day and night sequences, dynamic weather, and some spectacular skies. The dialogue and voice acting is excellent (and includes enough swearing to make the Teen rating rather questionable), as is the understated musical score.

Beautiful skies and scenes are a big part of Gothic.

The game is as great as the sum of its parts, and that's high praise when you consider how much stuff Piranha has packed into this game. Endure the tiresome beginning, come to grips with the quirky interface, and then settle back and enjoy one of the best role-playing games to come along in quite some time.

UPSIDE	Expansive, genuine fantasy world and characters
DOWNSIDE	Starts slower than your grandmother in February
RATING	★★★★½

[left] Battle at the R.E.F.I.N.E.R.Y. >>> Tank D.U.E.L. >>> Rabbits holding the L.I.N.E.



S.W.I.N.E.

P.R.E.T.T.Y. but not much E.L.S.E.

by Tom Chick

GENRE Real-time strategy DEVELOPER Stormregion Ltd. [www.stormregion.com] PUBLISHER Fishtank Interactive [www.fishtankgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 466, 96MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

***S.W.I.N.E.* is nothing** N.E.W. It combines two time-honored traditions in computer gaming: fun with punctuation (*Fly!*) and cute things beating up on each other and getting mauled: lemmings (*Lemmings*), worms (*Worms*), sheep (*Sheep*), and little bald men (*Baldies*). Violence to pigs (*Hogs of War*) is old news, predating computer games with the big bad wolf's legendary suburban renewal. But the T.W.I.S.T. this time around is the rabbits. *S.W.I.N.E.* pits pigs against rabbits to supposedly humorous effect. The rabbits speak with bad French accents and the pigs speak with bad German accents. Between missions, you'll be subjected to wacky cut scenes and mission briefings peppered with cringe-inducing puns. The rabbit artillery is a "Carrotpult." The pigs have a tank called "That's All, Folks." H.A. H.A.

To be fair, the humor [sic] is almost invisible when you're actually playing *S.W.I.N.E.*, which is an entirely conventional real-time strategy game. If it weren't for occasional postage stamp sized window popping up with animated animals delivering corny sound bites in their bad accents (yes, you can turn these off), you might as well be playing any real-time strategy game with tanks.

The two sides are almost identical. Pigs and rabbits use the same vehicles, with the exception that pigs get a heavy tank and the rabbits get an anti-tank rocket launcher. There's no base building or resource management, and there are only a handful of tactical options. Basically you're dealing with the hackneyed maxim that slow units have more firepower and weaker units move faster. Some units have special abilities, but most of these favor the defender. You can lay mines, dig in so you're invulnerable to most weapons, or deploy artillery so it can fire. Since *S.W.I.N.E.* has only a rudimentary AI that won't attack unless you enter a unit's activation radius, defensive special abilities are all but wasted in the single player game. In fact, you can breeze through most of *S.W.I.N.E.* by A: buying slow hard-hitting units and always keeping them close together, or B: buying lots of artillery to attack units from outside the computer units' activation radius.

Most of the missions are puzzles with hard-coded linear solutions: fight group of units A, cross bridge B, fight group of units C, reach objective D, win. Since each vehicle earns experience and you can buy then upgrades that carry over from mission to mission, you can't afford to lose units. This means a lot of saving, reloading, and replaying. As you earn strategic points, you can buy units during a mission. You can also customize your army by buying equipment for units' upgrade slots. Each vehicle has a limited supply of ammo and fuel that can be replenished with supply trailers. It's all very *P.A.N.Z.E.R. G.E.N.E.R.A.L.*, but in a real-time strategy milieu.

The limited ammo and fuel don't add anything to the game but busywork. The customizable units should have given multiplayer games a bit more depth, but they almost always come down to expensive heavy units slugging it out with each other (multiplayer Domination and Capture the Flag games are the exception, forcing tactics like splitting up your forces or holding positions on the map). Without a skirmish AI or missions with any replay value, this is one of those games you may as well S.H.E.L.V.E. once you've played the single player campaigns.

Bridge A.S.S.A.U.L.T.

There is an attractive engine here in lieu of a substantial game. *S.W.I.N.E.* uses 3D graphics with crisp terrain textures and vividly animated units that bob as they drive and turn their turrets to find targets and fire. There are smoke, explosions, debris, burnt-out hulks, the works. It's a good-looking game, but these days, what isn't? Since you'll rarely have more than a handful of units, the interface is simple. Since weapon ranges are relatively short, the close-in perspective isn't a problem. Since you can save any time during a mission, the alarmingly frequent lock-ups won't always force you to start over from the beginning. And since the gameplay isn't anything that wasn't done better in *Ground Control* or *Battle Realms*, you won't miss anything—except a bunch of bad jokes—if you play one of those games instead. And in case you're wondering, you still won't haven't any idea what *S.W.I.N.E.* stands for when you finish the game.

UPSIDE	It's a good-looking game
DOWNSIDE	It's a good-looking game that has little to recommend beyond its looks
RATING	★★☆☆☆

The nearly-nude mullet man finds love. >>> Talking about pizza always gets things started right.

The Sims Hot Date

Maxis goes where few gamers dare—on a date

RATING ★★★★½

GENRE People Simulation DEVELOPER Maxis [www.maxis.com] PUBLISHER Electronic Arts [www.ea.com] REQUIREMENTS The Sims MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

People that don't "get" *The Sims*—that's you, Mr. So-Called Hardcore Gamer—miss out on what is the funniest pure role-playing experience in existence. While there probably isn't anything quite as pathetic as finding love for your little Sims, the *Hot Date* expansion also frees them from their homebound lives and focuses on the game's greatest strength; its surreal Sim-to-Sim interaction. (Best guess for another expansion: the workplace. How about *The Sims Get a Job!*)

While *Livin' Large* was a glorified content patch and *House Party* focused on making your home a more fun place, *Hot Date* adds an entirely new zone, the Downtown Area. You grab a cab from your house and, once there, you have an untold number of opportunities to meet more Sims (there are usually dozens walking around… that hottie Bella Goth is always ready to party) and engage in that most weird element of Sims-ing, interpersonal relationships.

It sounds stupid, and in many ways it is, but it's pulled off with so much style and flair it's impossible not to be seduced by its charms. Simlish, the brilliant nonsensical language used by the Sims, has more sounds and voices that do an even better job of delivering inflection, and Maxis has expanded the dialogue options. A new Interests attribute helps you connect with others, and is increased through various items you can purchase both for the home and while downtown (that magazine rack holds all the answers).

Interestingly enough, you're given completely free reign to create the downtown of your own design—nothing costs any of your precious simoleans. It's set up in lots much like the regular neighborhood, and all but one are populated with existing structures. You can bulldoze existing structures and create your own restaurants and shops, making them as weird and/or wonderful as you'd like. (When visiting with your Sim, however, you do need to spend money on food, gifts for your partners and friends, and on various other oddities.)

The Sims is so full of fantastic details—the new "social" animations, in particular, are hysterically funny—it has more legs than people think. With the ever-expanding numbers of buildings and objects found at www.thesims.com, you'll never be at a loss for new stuff to check out. Gamers used to learning a game system run out of gas after a few days, but for everyone else, the sheer joy of dabbling, experimenting, or (it has to be said) torturing your Sims, never grows old. It may be pathetic, but it's pathetically brilliant. —*Steve Bauman*

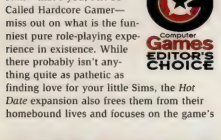
Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

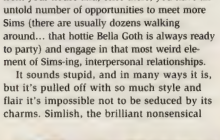
Kohan: Ahriman's Gift

More content for a brilliant game

RATING ★★★★½

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER Timegate Studios [www.timegatestudios.com] PUBLISHER Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone





Behold, the dumbest looking shop ever made. >>> Mullet man finds that if he asks women about themselves, they will dig him and his mullet.

If you purchase just one strategy game this season, you can't go wrong with either game in the *Kohan* series. *Immortal Sovereigns*, released in spring of 2001, is easily one of the best strategy games of the year [see page 56]. *Ahriman's Gift*,

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

The campaigns give you the chance to play the more sinister and exotic factions.

the in-game prequel but real-life sequel, offers three new campaigns and a collection of new units, heroes, spells, AI opponents, and more.

If you've never played either game, you should opt for *Ahriman's Gift*, if only because it offers more stuff. It would be nice if it also included the first game's campaign (making the buying decision that much easier) but it doesn't. It seems that the publishers are trying to make it clear that *Ahriman's Gift* is not simply an expansion, but rather a new game in its own right. But is it? Not really.

Ahriman's Gift is more of the same—more scenarios, more units, more tweaks, and more stuff. When you're building on a foundation as brilliant as *Kohan*, however, that is not at all a bad thing. The *Kohan* series eliminates the micro-tedium of running a game economy and managing combat while in no way trivializing its importance of either—a tricky balancing act that no other real-time game to date can match. *Ahriman's Gift* changes none of this, while providing a beefier set of campaigns that outshine the original game in all respects (save for the voice acting, which continues to be supplied by ordinary folks growling into microphones). The new unit types and spells only add to the fun of creating companies.

If you played the original, you will be very satisfied with this follow-up. Players new to the series have quite a treat in store. —*Dave Perkins*

Timegate has consistently upgraded the AI, creating very lifelike and challenging opponents.

Screamer 4x4

The thinking man's off-road sim

RATING ★★★★½

GENRE Off-Road Racing **PUBLISHER** Virgin Interactive [www.vie.co.uk] **DEVELOPER** Clever's Development [www.clevers.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-4 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

***Screamer 4x4* is** a gem of a game that makes excellent use of 3D to simulate off-road driving. This European import isn't sleek or sexy—instead it stomps through rough terrain and leaps out of the woods to deliver one of the best driving experiences anywhere.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

In the championship mode, you navigate a series of checkpoints to get from A to B in a minimum amount of time. Narrow gates are sprinkled liberally across nasty hills, deep gullies, and shallow ponds. You might crest a hill only to find a sheer drop on the other side. Instead of taking a raucous ride down that incline, you might need to make a hard right following a precarious path along the top of the hill while dodging foliage all the way. The game's brand of strategic driving is engrossing. You must constantly eye the terrain for the optimal path to save precious seconds without destroying your vehicle.

The game also includes excellent competitive modes for use with both human and computer opponents. King of the Hill is a standout success where you must bash others from the top of a plateau. Plowing into three other opponents at high speed sending all of you soaring to your doom is exhilarating. Demolition includes the perpetually entertaining goal of smashing your adversaries before they nail you. Combine these with straight racing and the championship style of play and you've got the icing on an already tasty cake.

The way the trucks bob and weave realistically with each undulation in the decidedly uneven terrain proves the quality of the simulation. Nighttime driving is difficult without throwing rain into the mix, but you're forced to deal with both. The landscape could be less angular, but it's often an integral part of the gameplay so why pick nits? This is a top-notch product selling for a ridiculously low budget price. Don't miss it. —*David J. Long*

Manufacturer's 4x4s are beautifully rendered by the graphics engine. >>> This time trial is tumbling downhill fast, but the gate wasn't missed!

Zooming down the infamous Brazilian tunnel.

Ballistics

Fastest. Game. Ever.

RATING ★★★½☆

GENRE Really Fast Racing PUBLISHER Xicat [www.xicat.com] DEVELOPER: Grin REQUIREMENTS Pentium 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

Ballistics is without a doubt the fastest racer ever made. The game is all about speed. Make that insane speed. Reaching velocities that pop the sound barrier, this is a racing game for adrenaline freaks.

The setup is simple: you start out as a rookie pilot of a speedster that is magnetically sealed to tracks, and then try to make your way into the spotlight. You can take your speedster into the shop and upgrade it with the funds that you earn by winning races. There are several toys to play with in the shop, and you can tinker with various racing strategies.

The tracks are more like tunnels with obstacles and power ups placed along the way. A power up might provide extra boost fuel (used to reach those insane speeds) or coolant to sooth your engine. Obstacles litter the tunnels, and you need to avoid slamming into them at all cost. You start your career in the rookie league. The trials here consist of a few tracks that you run to qualify for the Pro league, where you unlock new tracks and must qualify for the Ballistics league, where still more tracks are available. The end goal is to win each race and be crowned Ballistics champ.

This is no easy feat, as the Pro league is very tough. The rookie league is more forgiving, as running full speed into an obstacle does not detach your speedster from the track—not so on the Pro and Ballistics levels. It gets frustrating when you are zipping around at supersonic speed only to get derailed by a speed bump. Knowing the track is crucial to success. One unfortunate downside to the speeds at which you race is the fact that you rarely even see your opponents. Insane velocities create a lot of space between competitors.

Ballistics is a neat little racer that is just a bit too unforgiving at times. If you like going really fast, however, it's really worth a look. *—William Abner*

Rally Trophy

Real trees!

RATING ★★★★☆

GENRE Rally Racing DEVELOPER Bugbear Entertainment [www.bugbear.fi] PUBLISHER JoWood Productions [www.jowood.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 300, 64MB RAM, 3D AcceleratorMULTIPLAYER 2-6 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

***Rally Trophy* is** one of the most attractive games available on the PC. Right from the opening movie, when you realize all the footage is taken from the in-game engine, you know you're in for a visual treat. Many games rely on looks to sell themselves, but this one provides great gameplay to go with it.

You get to drive eleven cars spanning ten years in rally history. Racing gems include the Mini Cooper and the powerful but tricky Lancia Stratos. Many of these cars may be unfamiliar to American audiences, but it doesn't take long to feel them out once you hit the gravel. The front wheel drive cars are infinitely easier to handle. Believable physics combined with much-needed force feedback help you keep the horsepower under control. If you don't have a force feedback controller, however, there often aren't enough audible cues to warn you when you lose grip. It's a small blemish on an otherwise incredibly entertaining driving experience.

Gawking at the scenery is almost as much fun as racing. *Rally Trophy* is a gorgeous game. Even better, every roadside object is a potential hazard. Bulbous rocks protruding from the earth can send your car for a wild ride, and the courses are packed full of individual trees. All of the terrain is pulled together with excellent texture work to create beautiful vistas.

The brevity of the courses is less satisfying, but the extreme differences in each car's handling make even the short courses fun. The roads take on new life when you've got more power than you know what to do with under the hood. The game has plenty of arcade options, so even the novice player can jump right in and have fun throwing a Mini around. If you are looking for a diverse lot of cars and some stunningly beautiful roads to drive them on, then *Rally Trophy* is squarely at the front of the rallying pack. *—David J. Long*

Mud, sand, gravel, tarmac and even snow, provide variety.

F1 2001

We'll get it right next year

RATING ★★★½☆

GENRE Racing DEVELOPER Image Space, Inc. [www.imagespaceinc.com] PUBLISHER EA Sports [www.easports.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 333, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

Electronic Arts has released three Formula 1 games in eighteen months. *F1 2001* is the latest in this series of split personality racers. It might have been the best yet, but it needs a bit more time in the garage (read: patch) before it can truly compete.

The biggest change from *F1 Championship Season 2000* is most definitely visual. You'll delight in the reworking of the circuits. Indianapolis finally bears a stronger resemblance to the real venue. The graphical facelift also puts the game on par with its PlayStation 2 counterpart, but requires a hot rod PC for full-on settings. Though great while driving, you can't enjoy the looks in replays due to glitch-filled viewing that isn't even viewable full screen. The game also has issues with GeForce cards. Rearview mirrors work intermittently and sometimes the game does not function without first finding the

Come back, Mika!

right video driver revision.

The simulation is all new and much stronger with an incredible feeling of speed. It takes many annoying hours to get your controls calibrated, thanks to the imprecise interface. The car is quicker to spin and these spins sometimes feel canned. That doesn't detract much from the driving (which feels spot-on, overall), but an unfortunate lack of force feedback deprives you of the physical response to correct them. The improved audio, which is one of the game's strongest features, instead implies the sensation of grip and also includes excellent engine notes.

There are more tracks in the Driving School this time, but still not all of them. The voiceovers were ripped out, so school is not quite as helpful as it was in the previous game. AI drivers are much improved though and turn

EA took liberties with Suzuka's Ferris Wheel.

ordinary races into real events. It seems like there will be a new revision of this game yearly and that can only lead to bigger and better things. However *F1 2001*, as good as it is, has plenty of room for improvement. Beware these cracks in the road. —*David J. Long*

Tennis Masters Series

One huge flaw shy of a good time

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Tennis DEVELOPER Microids [www.microids.com] PUBLISHER Microids [www.microids.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 Players; Internet, LAN, Modem ESRB Everyone

Tennis Masters Series is hands down the best PC tennis game you can buy, but that doesn't necessarily make it a great game. Exhibition, multiplayer, and season modes make up the game options. Season is the meat of the game and it's quite impressive—to a point. There's a tournament schedule to follow, prize money to earn, and rivals to conquer. The more you play, the more you get to know your computer adversaries. It's quite compelling to meet the same opponent that beat you in the finals of a tournament six months earlier. It would be nice if you could customize the length of a match; the game forces you to play the standard best three out of five sets, and that can take a very long time. Thankfully, you can save a match in progress and return to it later.

Each player is rated in several categories (such as speed, stamina, volley, and serve) and has a style of play (such as baseliner or power hitter). Every player has strengths and weaknesses, even the stars.

Player movement is very deliberate. You cannot stop and change directions on a dime. It feels more like a simulation than an arcade game—that takes some getting used to, but it's very challenging and player positioning is crucial. The computer player AI is solid. If you rush the net frequently, your opponent will lob the ball over your head. It takes thought and patience to beat the computer opponent.

The game could have been stellar, but it falls flat in one critical area. You never, *ever* hit a ball out. Sure you may hit into the net, or arrive late and miss a forehand, but the ball never goes long or wide. And that renders all of the game's good points meaningless. Without the tension of whether a shot will draw chalk or just miss, the game lacks… well, tension. In short, it's simply not tennis. —*William Abner*

Tennis is a tiring sport… time for some agua. >>> Playing on clay is a whole new ballgame.

Ms. Pac-Man: Quest for the Golden Maze

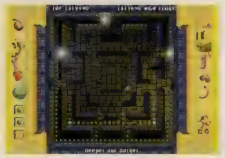
Aiming low and hitting its target squarely in the chompers

RATING ★★☆☆☆

DEVELOPER Creature Labs [www.creaturelabs.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2 players; same machine ESRB Everyone

Ms. Pac-Man: *Quest for the Golden Maze* comes in a day-glow yellow DVD-sized box that still provides more space than the CD and pamphlet-sized manual requires. This smaller package is one of the first signs the industry is finally addressing the ludicrous amount of waste in a standard game box. To be slightly more accurate, the industry is doing this because of pressure from Wal-Mart, not because it's suddenly grown a conscience.

That the packaging is the most interesting thing about the game is a testament to its banality. Launched in those wacky 80s, the original classic *Ms. Pac-Man* struck a blow for equal rights for women gamers and was one of the first videogames to have cut scenes between levels. Its "modern" incarnation shows that viewing older games through the warm fuzzy glow of nostalgia only takes you so far. There are many ways to do these things, but this example is completely uninspired. At least the *Pong* remake showed some creativity. Instead, *Quest for the Golden Maze* is the same basic game with… powerups! Secret levels! More mazes! Wow, that must have taken all of 10 minutes of design work.



Yeah, it really looks like this.

Funny thing is, the changes—the maze changes every time the board is cleared, there are little mid-level mini-mazes—break up the Zen-like feeling you get from a repetitive game like this. When you think about the hour it takes to blast through all of the mazes and the sluggish keyboard controls (which gets particularly annoying on some of the mazes with tight corners), you realize that it somehow manages to fall short of reaching its already low aspirations. But at least it has a nice box. —*Steve Bauman*

Gotta get all those bananas… how Freudian.

Dig Dug Deeper

No, it's not a porn game

RATING ★★☆☆☆

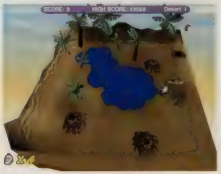
DEVELOPER Creature Labs [www.creaturelabs.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

For the love of GodGames, will someone stop Infogrames' senseless slaughter of classic games? Following in the footsteps of *Ms. Pac-Man*'s mediocre makeover, *Dig Dug* has also been sent to the fiery pit of suck (mixed metaphor alert). It's disappointing that *Dig Dug Deeper* isn't the porn version of the original the name implies; instead it's one of those "modern" remakes that leaves all of the nostalgic charm at the door.

You're still a miner clearing out Pookas and Fygars. Armed with your mighty pump, you harpoon beasts and inflate them to death. In *Deeper*, our intrepid hero has taken off into space and is challenging them on their home turf. It's up to you to… do the same thing that you did before. Which would be fine and dandy, because the original arcade game is bloody entertaining. But *Deeper* features sloppy controls and dumber AI (if you can call it that… the Pookas and Fygars rarely chase you around anymore). Why a simple game like this has a finite number of levels is a mystery—why not just go for high scores and randomized levels? Once you've completed all the levels, the game ends with a little "You won" graphic. Wow.

Couldn't the developers at least try to make the dug out areas look somewhat… well, dug out? In the original, everything had a slightly rough edge, but now his high-tech shovel digs out perfectly flat walls. The sound is abysmal, with Dig Dug emitting an Anakin Skywalker-like "Yippee!" every time he gets a powerup. The pump sound has effectively gone away (it's faint and indistinct), the digging sound is grating… ugh.

Yes, it's a $20 game. Yes, expectations are adjusted accordingly. And yes, it's a retro game that relies more on the nostalgia of the player. If you're longing for some *Dig Dug*, however, try MAME or Microsoft's *Return of Arcade*. Or better yet, find the cigarette burn-covered machine buried in the corner of your local arcade. —*Steve Bauman*



You start each level on a screen like this: escaping Pookas run around for you to blow 'em up.

In case you haven't figured it out, this game blows… up lots of Fygars and Pookas

Damage is mostly cosmetic and you have to try hard to get it.

Larry Ragland 4x4 Challenge

A good way to have absolutely no fun at all for two hours or less

RATING ★☆☆☆☆

GENRE Off-Road Racing DEVELOPER Xpiral [www.xpiral.com] PUBLISHER Xicat Interactive [www.xicat.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-6 Players; Internet, LAN, Same Machine ESRB Everyone

It's difficult to find true bottom of the barrel games today—the worst products are often merely mediocre. Then there is *Larry Ragland's 4x4 Challenge*, a game that breaks the mold and takes dull minimalism to new levels. It seems that scraping the bottom was the goal of its creation.

The game doesn't have any major bugs and everything works fine, but there is so little content you'll have seen it all in an hour or two, and you'll be glad that it's over when you have. There are eight tracks and fifteen almost indistinguishable trucks to choose from. There's nothing to unlock, and your reward for winning groups of events is a splash screen of joy. The courses feature jumps and varying turns that are little more than speed bumps on your way to a nap. The name of the game is just wrong—there is no Challenge. You start at the back of the pack in every event, and by the midpoint of any race you will have passed through the six-car field. Even incompetent players will have a tough time *trying* to lose.

Every track looks basically the same in both night and day races, and the visual presentation is shareware level at best. Many user-made mods for current games feature far better textures than this ugly beast. The 3D terrain is rudimentary, and the trucks seem to float across it like sad hulking ghosts, casualties of ennui. The developers' dedication to poor quality doesn't stop with the visuals, either—the sound is monotonous and the music is annoying. The game has a multiplayer mode (share your pain with your friends!), but even that's a waste. You can run single races or championships, but with so few tracks you'll get about five minutes of non-entertainment out of that.

Sparse as it is, the off-road racing genre offers far better options than this. Don't waste your time with this clunker, and if you see Larry Ragland in person, tell him his game sucks. *—David J. Long*

Fast Break Basketball

No frills, lots of fun

RATING ★★★★☆

GENRE Text Sports Sim PUBLISHER Brian Nichols DEVELOPER Brian Nichols [www.sportplanet.com/fbb] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER Same machine ESRB Everyone

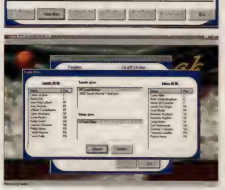
PC hoop fans are a neglected lot. Microsoft's *NBA Inside Drive* series is now an Xbox only franchise, and even a storied series such as EA Sports' *NBA Live* is on a PC hiatus. Thankfully, independent text sim developers are on the scene to provide relief. One such developer is Brian Nichols, creator of an addictive little game called *Fast Break Basketball*.

Fast Break uses the current 2001 NBA rosters, although you can construct a league with fictional players and teams if you like or redraft your entire league from scratch. This isn't a single season simulator; the meat of the game is its career play. You take the reins of an NBA franchise, juggle the NBA's "soft" salary cap, trade players, draft, sign free agents, set lineups, and so on. Games are either simulated outright or coached. Coach mode isn't all that detailed, and mostly consists of setting game plans and reading the play by play. It would be nice to have a bit more control as head coach during the actual games. Simulating games are a better option as you still have some control, such as setting basic team strategies and shooting tendencies.

The game tracks a ton of stats over the course of each player's career, and even keeps track of the team(s) that he played for, as well as any awards he may have earned (such as All-Star and All-Pro honors). Players are rated in several categories, but it's not quite detailed enough. For example, there's a "defense" rating that supposedly covers both blocks and steals. Players are also rated in terms of team loyalty, greed, and the desire to play for a winner, which is a nice touch.

This is a game geared towards hardcore basketball fans that love stats and love the idea of managing an NBA team. If you enjoy games such as *Front Office Football* and *Baseball Mogul*, you owe it to yourself to give *Fast Break* a shot. *—William Abner*

You can order the game online from www.sportplanet.com/fbb



You can partake in All-Star Weekend, complete with 3-point and slam dunk contests. >>> The CPU AI offers trades in the form of players and/or draft picks.

OUT of the BOX

the return of the king

A computer gaming legend comes back to life

Winter always reminds me of Cinemaware. Maybe it's because I played many of the development house's games over the Christmas holidays, or maybe it's because so many of those classics had the characteristics of those blockbuster movies that arrive like clockwork at the beginning of every December. At any rate, come the first snowfall I start thinking fondly of *Defender of the Crown*, *It Came From the Desert*, *Wings*, and *TV Sports Football*, among others. I often feel like playing them again, reliving the early days of computer gaming when we were just starting to realize what was possible.

Apparently, I'm not the only one who feels that way. A chance encounter with an online news item informed me that Cinemaware was still a going concern, and had in fact just re-released *It Came From the Desert* as a free download. One short download later and I was back in Lizard Breath, California, preparing to battle giant ants unleashed by man's struggles with the atom. What's more, I was even able to grab a Europe-only sequel that I'd never heard of—*Antheads: It Came From the Desert II*. Unplug the phone, my next few days are booked.

Make that next few weeks. As I was soon to discover, the "Vault" section of the Cinemaware site also includes ROM versions of *Defender of the Crown*, *TV Sports Basketball*, *TV Sports Boxing*, and *Wings*. That's a great sampler to get you started, and further information on more than a dozen games that encompass the company's output in the 1980s and early 1990s will whet your appetite for more. If you never played these games, you're in for a real treat. *Defender of the Crown* is nearly as entertaining now as it was during its initial release in 1986. Its action and adventure elements and its medieval backdrop influenced many games that followed, most notably Sierra's *Conquests* series. *Wings* set the stage for Sierra's acclaimed *Red Baron*, with a World War I setting featuring authentic planes and the ability to role-play an entire career. The *TV Sports* line were arguably the first modern computer sports games, boasting management features and depth that had never been seen before.

Other ROMs are set to be released in the coming months, as Cinemaware preps the marketplace for the 2002 release of *Defender of the Crown*, *The Three Stooges*, and *Wings* for the GameBoy Advance, remastered versions of *Defender of the Crown* and *The Three Stooges* with new graphics for the PC, and a brand-new PC title called *Robin Hood: Defender of the Crown*. You can request the next game to be issued in ROM format in the website forum. For what it's worth, I'm torn between *Rocket Ranger* and *TV Sports Football*. The former was pulp fiction at its best. Fighting off futuristic Nazis using sci-fi technology from the '50s was a blast. And the latter was the template for EA Sports' *Madden* football series. There isn't a dud in the lot, though, so the order of release doesn't really matter all that much.

Be aware that you'll need to use a program like Mo'Slo when using the PC ROMs on modern systems; otherwise the games will be too fast to be playable. Other formats require the appropriate emulator. Fortunately, Cinemaware provides links to everything you need.

Considering the way that Cinemaware is entering the modern marketplace with new PC and GameBoy Advance titles, the company might not be considered yesterday's news in computer gaming for much longer. ●

Getting More From...

Return to Return to Castle Wolfenstein
Trench Toast is Axis and Allies with a twist

The first of what promises to be many official multiplayer add-ons for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* has arrived. Nerve Software, the developer behind the multiplayer half of the game, has released Trench Toast. This terrain-based checkpoint map supports up to 32 players and is set in a hellish World War I-styled environment featuring a wealth of trenches, canals, and plain old torn-up turf that can be used for cover. Numerous fortifications and gun emplacements also dot the landscape. If you're one of the three people out there that hasn't purchased *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, you can check out Trench Toast as part of a new multiplayer demo. Both are available from the official website and the better fan sites, such as Planet Wolfenstein and Wolfenstein HQ. The map alone clocks in at a modest 3.9 MB, though the demo is a dial-up-challenging 66 MB.

Don't Tell PETA...

...that zoo tycoons can nab a polar bear

Microsoft has concluded its "Beast of Show" *Zoo Tycoon* contest by awarding the grand prize to Magnet, a polar bear from the Baltimore Zoo. To mark the occasion, Microsoft has created an add-on allowing users to place Magnet in their own zoos. Also available are a number of holiday season goodies, including a reindeer and the Christmas Tree Farm scenario, new animals such as an Asian elephant and a mountain lion, and a fancy buildings file that lets you spruce up the architecture. The size of the files range from around 50 KB to more than 5 MB, and all can be downloaded at Microsoft's official *Zoo Tycoon* website.

D & D & Diablo

Unite Baldur's Gate with Diablo II

Fans devoted to both the *Baldur's Gate* and *Diablo* series can bring their faves together with the *Baldur's Gate* Mod for *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction*. This sweeping conversion changes each of the seven character classes to correspond with *Dungeons & Dragons* standards, with amazons becoming rangers, barbarians becoming berserkers, and so on. Skill sets have also been changed to suit each new class. The mod further alters weapon descriptions, provides class-specific equipment, and a whole lot more that space considerations prevent me from detailing. For more information, or to just download the 4.3 MB file, head to the official website.

This ain't happenin', man!

Aliens, Predators, and patches

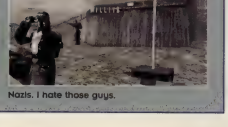
Monolith Productions and its publisher Sierra have bolstered *Aliens Versus Predator 2* with a comprehensive patch and a multiplayer map pack. The patch makes more than a dozen significant changes, from making sure that weapons are picked up even if the player can't take on any more ammo to fixing an invisibility bug in multiplayer modes. Those now visible multiplayer fans can bleed acid all over 10 new maps. Four each are provided for the deathmatch and evac games, while two are specified for overrun. For the bandwidth conscious, the patch weighs in at 5.1 MB and the multiplayer map pack at 12.6 MB. Both can be found at the official website and at Planet AvP.

Viva la Serious Sam!

Blast StarCraft's zerg and protoss in this total conversion

From the department of funny (not ha-ha) ideas comes the *StarCraft* total conversion for *Serious Sam*. A French development team is currently working on giving us the chance to gun down the terrans, zerg, and protoss in glorious 3D. It is expected to feature a separate campaign for each of the races, along with a number of multiplayer games. The mod is expected to enter the alpha stage soon. Visit the official StarCraft TC website for a look at the work in progress. ●

Some of the StarCraft TC character models.


Nazis. I hate those guys.

LINKAGE

ALIENS VERSUS PREDATOR 2
(Official Site) http://avp2.sierra.com/
BALDUR'S GATE MOD FOR DIABLO II: LORD OF DESTRUCTION
http://www.planetdiablo.com/bgmod/feat.html
CINEMAWARE
(Official Site) http://www.cinemaware.com
MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
http://www.lith.com/
NERVE SOFTWARE
http://www.nervesoftware.com/
PLANET AVP
http://www.planetavp.com/
PLANET WOLFENSTEIN
http://www.planetwolfenstein.com/
RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN
(Official Site) http://www.activision.com/games/wolfenstein/home.html
STARCRAFT TC
http://starcrafttc.free.fr/uk/choix.html
WOLFENSTEIN HQ
http://www.wolfensteinhq.com/
ZOO TYCOON
(Official Site) http://www.microsoft.com/games/zootycoon/

BARGAIN BIN

Clive Barker's Undying

Now just $11.99, there's no reason to avoid playing this spooky, highly underrated shooter. [EA Games/2001]

Far Gate

It might not be the year's finest real-time strategy game, but *Far Gate* boasts enough good moments to make it a steal for the current sticker price of $9.99. [Microids/2001]

Might & Magic Millennium Edition

Old? Hell, yeah. But the four *Might & Magic* titles collected here (IV through VII) represent a great slice of role-playing history for less than $10. [300/1993–1999]

Planet of the Apes

Not the best of adventures, sure, but it's around $10, and it has the benefit of being a hundred times better than the Tim Burton movie. [UbiSoft/2001]

Star Trek Starship Creator

More a toy than a game, *Star Trek Starship Creator* is perfect for obsessive geeks. Add at under $10, you can buy it and still afford that Leonard Nimoy Collector's Plate from the Franklin Mint. [300/1998]

We asked for feedback, we got a lot of feedback. Random samplings: "Reviews are best in the business," says Paul Garrow, who also likes depth and coverage of role-playing and strategy games and hates those once-a-year "E3 survey" articles. Jeremy Hoffman skims reviews but enjoys editorials and behind-the-scenes articles. What everyone hated, though, was January's Rebound replies. "Is the new Rebound editor a monkey who slaps randomly at the keyboard, or a 13 year-old nephew of a senior editor with a lack of talent and serious substance abuse problem?" asks David. "Both ways have already been tried by other gaming magazines, and neither is entertaining." Rob Quinn asked if it was some kind of joke to print, in his words, "literal gibberish." It wasn't literally gibberish, Mr. Quinn, it was… Klingon. Okay, it was a joke that wasn't funny and carried on much too long, much like anything involving Carrot Top. On with the letters, which are full of piss and vinegar this month…

We love market research

I would like to respond to the following excerpt from your January "Upfront" column ["Forceful Feedback," CGM 134].

"Most magazines do a lot of surveys and market research to determine what their readers want, or at least to determine what their readers think they want. Not being a huge fan of this type of statistical trickery—and unless in a brutally cynical mood, I find marketing only slightly more appealing than invasive surgery—I prefer the more anecdotal feedback we receive via letters from readers"

I am always very happy to hear someone utter these words! What good is spending all that time and money on market research when you can get all the feedback you need from a couple of letters? Certainly, a handful of consumers taking the time to write to you would be not only unbiased, but representative of all your readers!

This being said, if I and five of my friends were to write to you and tell you that you shouldn't run *any* reviews because PC Gamer does them better, and that you should just stick with articles, you would of course do this? I applaud your narrow thinking. People like you give truly competitive companies with real market research skills the edge in this competitive world. You just keep on gathering your statistically significant samples from a couple of your most diehard and unbiased fans, and I'll always have job security.

David Nielsen
Market Research Manager

This just in: A survey of 200 readers found this letter pompous. –ed

Pirates R Us

First, thanks for not mentioning *all* the ways to get warez on the net! ["Soft Copy," CGM 134] Secondly, just as Napster got me buying audio CDs, so too has downloading hacked games led me to buy titles I otherwise wouldn't have otherwise considered, and avoid ones I would have.

When *The Sims* came out, a friend gave me a hacked copy as "filler" on a CD of a program I was interested in. I never bought (or really played) the one I was looking for, but Maxis has made some good money as a result of his choice, since my wife and I got hooked on *The Sims* and it's expansion packs.

And SafeDisc blows! Everytime I've installed *The Sims* or an expansion pack the machine locks up when trying to load the game. At first I spent a lot of time on the phone with Tech Support to no avail; poking around on my own one night with various "tools," I realized it was the copy protection that was at fault.

Thus begun my education about "SafeDisc". I started to dust off my old programming skills to try to hack it myself but stumbled across a link to "No-CD" patches and sure enough; applied the patch and it worked fine. Now when expansion packs come out, I wait until I find a patch before going to Wal-Mart to buy two copies so we can play at the same time.

Tim Turner

Fuzzy math

I'm a little fuzzy on why, after printing an editorial on how the feedback you have received recently indicated the importance of reviews, you would print a pointless article on piracy. Piracy may be a hot button to your advertisers, but knowing how much of it there is in Asia or Russia isn't helpful to your readers. I understand that advertisers are important, but without readers, you've got nothing.

More reviews, less editorial fluff pieces to appease your advertisers, please.

Ken Schaefer

She kicks high

I found Tom Chick's column "Console Envy" [CGM 134] pretty funny since it seems many PC editors in various magazines are always frothing at the mouth to play certain console games yet stick with their PCs. You see, as I've recently learned the key to bliss is to play both.

I'm the guy who was on the other side of the tracks. I owned just about every console around whether it was a Neo-Geo or an Atari 2600. The only "PC" gaming I did was on my commodore 64 back in the day. As Tom Chick was admiring the *Dead or Alive 3* girls, I used to admire the sweet first-person shooters on the PC. Everything looked so crisp and in high resolution.

Well, back in February, my wife and I bought a PC, and on the day we received it, I ran to the local Babbages to purchase some software for my daughter and *Unreal*

Tournament for myself. Next it was *No One Lives Forever* (one of the greatest shooters ever), *Star Trek Voyager—Elite Force*, and *Soldier of Fortune Gold*. I was hooked! I had entered shooter heaven and I'm not ever going to leave. Then a close friend talked me into buying *Diablo II*. Talk about addiction, I played that sucker for five months straight.

My Dreamcast kept sneezing from all of the dust that had collected on it. My Playstation was begging me to put a disc in. Eventually all good things come to a screeching halt and it did when my wife bought me a PS2 in October. Now I'm playing *Devil May Cry*, *Final Fantasy X*, and *Grand Theft Auto 3*. Even though I'm up to neck in PS2 software right now, I'm still a PC gamer and will be for life.

So now when my wife is watching *ER* at night, I'm killing nazis in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, and when she's on the PC I'm running errands for the mob in *Grand Theft Auto 3*. I've come to find that for first-person shooters and strategy games you need the PC, and for fighting, driving, sports, and all other types you need a console.

So my advice to Tom Chick is to buy that Xbox, or better yet a PS2. Having the best of both worlds will make you one happy ass gamer.

John Wawrzak

And lord knows, gamers want happy asses. –ed

Imagine missing the point. –ed

He hates us

I've been reading your magazine, the redheaded stepchild of the gaming media, for about a year now and I figured I should write and let you know that I won't be buying it any more.

But why you ask?

Well, where do I start?

How about your pathetic four-review issue, and your even lamer excuse for not printing more? You figured we

> "*Computer Games Magazine*'s coverage of Windows XP has been fine, but may I give your readers a reality check? As for their feelings on Microsoft and XP, I would like to say the Windows 9x OS is headed for the boneyard, just like Windows 3.1. You can run but you cannot hide. So blow the $99, upgrade to XP, and stop the whining already."
>
> **GEORGE BROWN**

Cranky and crabby

I think your magazine is great, but I've been noticing something. Your reviewers are the crabbiest, crankiest, most anal-retentive writers in the industry. You gave *Dark Age of Camelot* 4.5 stars and an Editor's Choice award, but if I hadn't seen the score before I read the text, I would have thought it would rate about 2. The entire review, save the opening and closing paragraphs, sounded negative.

Black and White garnered almost no credit from your reviewer for trying so many ways to break from the norm—something many of the editors in your magazine often wish for in their columns. *Empire Earth* was another review I took issue with. Every single one of the reviewers gripes was totally legit, but the whole review, as many of your others, is delivered with an attitude that leads me to believe you guys just really don't like games anymore. The tones of the reviewers recently are those of people who simply don't really care to have fun, just nitpick.

It's your magazine, so you can write and grade as you see fit. What's more, your information is almost always correct and your points are always valid. My point is this: you trivialize the masterful efforts of this industry's designers to make great and fun games by focusing too much on the negative. Lighten up; try having some fun once in a while.

John Prezioso

Throne of Imaginary Editing

Imagine a review written about a game called *Throne of Darkness* [CGM 134]. Imagine it has only seven paragraphs. Imagine that within that short space the word "imagine" is used 30 times. Imagine how annoying that was to read.

[Apparently not half as annoying as actually play the game. –ed]

Sure, the game sucks, but the writing doesn't have to match.

Now imagine Tom Chick in the unemployment line.

Dan Haster

Um, yeah

I write today to inform you of a computer game that is false and deceitful. The game is *Diablo II Expansion Set: Lord of Destruction*. This is very complex matter before you that I present. The section I refer to is the online portion driven by

battle net. The game is very harsh on kids, for many reasons that will be explained.

The first portion is the language allowed in the game. Anyone can say four letter words in a game to other people. May I remind you this game is targeted for teens [*Actually, it's M-rated, 17 and over. –ed*].

The second portion involves selling of items on ebay. In the game you can find exceptional, elite, rare, set, and unique items. Well, some of these items are so rare they can sell them on ebay in a range of $20-400$. The thing of it is, kids are becoming rude, liars, cheaters, hackers, or whatever other method that will get them these items so they can make a profit.

Kids are drawn to this so-called lotto game, in which you can turn over a item and sell it for a new bike or whatever. Those same kids kill, lie, hack, steal, cheat, and con players to get that bike they want.

I would like your magazine to purchase this game and assign someone to play it to discover all that is wrong with making a good PC game. You'll discover so much bad stuff, that everyone reading your story will be upset with Blizzard and battle.net, which will force them to make a better game for kids. If you assign someone to research my story, you will not be sorry.

Stephen Burdick

Er... we're on it. –ed

Wookie love

You guys used to say, "Your wookie is in the mail" in Rebound. Now you don't. What's with that?

MrBadAxe

We ran out of wookies. –ed

Letter (of the Dead)

Typing (of the dead) of (of the dead) the (of the dead) dead (of the dead) is (of the dead) a (of the dead) bad (of the dead) ass (of the dead) game (of the dead). I (of the dead) would (of the dead) put (of the dead) a (of the dead) Twinkie(of the dead) in (of the dead) an (of the dead) electrical (of the dead) socket (of the dead) and (of the dead) lick (of the dead) it (of the dead) just (of the dead) to (of the dead) be (of the dead) able (of the dead) to (of the dead) type (of the dead) a (of the dead) word (of the dead) and (of the dead) watch (of the dead) a (of the dead) zombie (of the dead) blow (of the dead) up (of the dead) into (of the dead) tiny (of the dead) bits (of the dead).

Bad Foot Happy Chicken (Of the Dead)

Your wookie (of the dead of course) is in the mail. –ed

Random incoherence

Damn I feel good. I just slammed a 40 ounce... sitting around getting high... watching the lava lamp... the more hits you take-more intense the lava lamp becomes. High hopes to get out of " Elvis Presley's rehab center " by the time I'm 32... Yippeekayaaaaaaa goodgawd!!!

crowyyz2

Drugs and alcohol are bad. Got that, kids? We'd send you a wookie, but we suspect you're already seeing 'em.... –ed

Panda porn

I take offense at the poor taste displayed in the ad for *Zoo Bandit* or *Zoo Master* or whatever the hell that game is called [*Zoo Tycoon, probably*]. At the bottom of the screen, there is a picture of a panda bear spread eagle with his ding dong in plain view for all to see. You people are sick.

Thomas Alphonse Muth Jr

Blame Microsoft. Always blame Microsoft. And while that's a damn sexy panda, imagine naked wookies... oh yeah. –ed

WeloveMicrosoft

I usually throw your magazine in the circular file without even opening it, but occasionally, I'll forget, or my mind will be on something else and I'll accidentally open it and within two or three pages of off-handed scanning, I suddenly remember why I throw your magazine away unread.

I am totally stunned that you can look at yourselves in the mirror and keep a straight face... there is just *no way* you can look at each other without bursting into raucous laughter about the people who actually pay money for your biased shit. If you didn't pander, you wouldn't have a magazine. I'm serious... do you think you could get your tongues any farther up Microsoft's anus? [*Microsoft has an anus? You looked?*] You are so obvious.

Maybe, on the cover of your magazine, you could run a picture of a large, Afro-American priapic monolith, with "MICROSOFT" engraved on the base. You could come out of the closet by having all your writers and editors standing in a meditative circle around this smooth, black obelisk, licking their lips, misty-eyed... got the picture?

Bill Wooley

Oh yeah, we got the picture. In fact, we may need therapy to forget it. Maybe we can get Microsoft to pay for it. –ed

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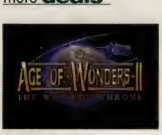

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Luclin, the ringed moon has been rediscovered and now Norrathians can venture to the eerie moonscape in the shadows of Luclin. This Expansion will provide gamers with additional character progression and hundreds of new items, spells, and creatures to battle. Travelers will be able to explore new adventure zones, while they interact with thousands of their peers.

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CINDY YANS

road to nowhere

torn between two loves

The smarmier side of online gaming

I looked into the mirror this morning and asked myself "why?" It happens in the best of relationships, but I never thought it could happen to ours. It was a "for better or for worse" commitment—lasted for years. Always there for me, ever faithful. So when a new face came along, how could I have been led astray? It wasn't a better-looking face, necessarily. It lacked the wisdom and longevity I had become so used to and felt so comfortable with. I thought we could just see one another casually. That wouldn't hurt anything. But after a while, the dalliance turned into more. Much more. And after a while of cheating, sneaking around behind closed doors, and lying to others, and myself, I truly strayed, and there may be no turning back. No one knows yet, and I suppose I thought that writing it all down would help me make some sense of it. Feeling guilty? *Oh* yeah.

> "There is still something ultimately more mesmerizing about the online games."

I'm sorry, *EverQuest*, I didn't do it on purpose. Sure, I know there's no harm in looking… it would be dishonest for anyone to say that she doesn't check out the attributes of the competition. SWF seeks RPG, "gifted," for LTR. But sometimes just looking becomes a brief caress, and then, well, all hell breaks loose. *Dark Age of Camelot* unfairly snuck up on me, taunted, tantalized, lured, tempted, enticed, and finally ensnared. Yes *EverQuest*, I know you are wearing your spiffy *Luclin* outfit, and that alone should have been enough to win me back…

I actually wrote those words several weeks ago after *Camelot* really did seem to turn my head and steal me away. But you know what? Even though the game has "solved" a lot of what makes *EverQuest* extremely tedious at times, and even with the added attraction of possible player-vs.-player combat, there's just something that has become incredibly formulaic about these types of games, most of which probably lies in their reward systems. The plot template for these babies is an egregious never-ending cycle of raising that little experience bar higher and higher by doing something over and over (and over and over) again, lest you become "stuck" in The BottomSniffer Wood or SwampThing Coulee until the end of time. It's partially a product of the medium—a book or a film doesn't require you to become level 12 before allowing you to progress through the story, and yet…think about tabletop role-playing (aw c'mon, you remember). The fun was in the *process* of the activity, not necessarily the result.

Comparing a table of five people playing make-believe to 6,000 people playing Follow the Spawn—well, it just seems as though there has to be a better paradigm for the persistent world. Yes, manipulation of your first-person avatar and the increasingly good-looking environments of the online games have a quality of immersion that cannot be surpassed by Cheetos, beer, and a belch. But the process of character development seems to mean more when the character is actually *you*. Nowadays there are more and more software packages becoming available for tabletop gamers—tools that will take some of the drudgery out of the rules interpretation and the dice rolls. They should stand warned, however, that as more tools are introduced, the more the gameplay becomes "antiseptic" until it too might fall prey to the punch-the-attack-button-go-get-a-Coke style of gameplay. In most of the persistent world RPGs it's possible to get experience while walking the dog, cooking dinner, taking a nap, watching football, using the Abdomenizer, stapling your finger to your forehead, every now and then checking to see whether you've been killed (oh crap) or leveled (woohoo). Now how much fun is that?

Is there a Grand Device that might bring more enjoyment to the gaming process of online RPGs? Probably, but no one's found a way to implement it quite yet. Fine. Cerebrally that seems to make sense. But still, and most of us cannot really describe it, even after all the years they've been around: there is still something ultimately more mesmerizing about the online games. It's probably because it's easier for the Lazy or Easily Distracted to get lost in them. After all, it does take more work to be a wizard while face to face with your scruffy roomie—especially considering that he really needs a shower.

Perhaps I'll just be celibate for a while and enter the Convent of Our Lady of Single-Player Gaming. My two loves will understand…but (gulp) my guild members probably will not. ●

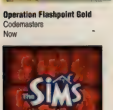
Operation Flashpoint Gold
Codemasters
Now

Serious Sam: Second Encounter
G.O.D.
Now

IL-2 Sturmovik
Ubi Soft
Now

Return to Castle Wolfenstein
Activision
Now

WarCraft III
Blizzard
Release Date: 06/15/02

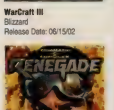


Sims Hot Date
EA
Now

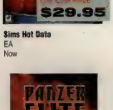
Medal of Honor
EA
Now

Civilization III
Infogrames
Now

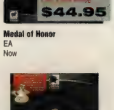
Tropico Exp. Pk.: Paradise Isle
G.O.D.
Now



Command & Conquer Renegade
EA
Now

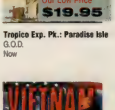


Panzer Elite Gold: Special Edition
Global Star
Now

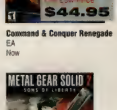


Black & White Creature Isle
EA
Now

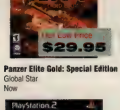
Totally Flying
Infogrames
Now



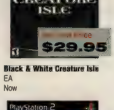
Squad Battles: Vietnam
HPS Sims
Now



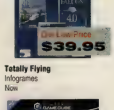
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty PSX 2 Konami
Now



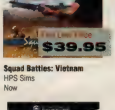
Grand Theft Auto 3 PS2
Rock Star
Now



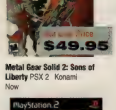
Matt Hoffman's Pro BMX 2 PS2
Activision
Now



Eternal Darkness Game Cube
Nintendo
Now



NFL Quarterback Club Game Cube
Acclaim
Now



Dynasty Warriors 3 PS2
Koei
Now

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PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

zoo construction high school

The best games we never made

I've been making games professionally for nine years, and I'm working on my sixth full one at the moment. Two were concepts chosen by somebody else, and of the four I've chosen, only one (*Tropico*) was truly original, with no clear-cut predecessor. The other three have been moderately derivative of existing games. My first game, *Iron Cross*, imitated the board game *Squad Leader*. My fourth game, *Railroad Tycoon II*, imitated the original *Railroad Tycoon* (even before we had procured the rights to be an "official sequel"). My sixth and latest game is also derivative, though I'll have to omit the details as we haven't announced the game yet. And even this modest accomplishment—the development of three derivative and one original game concepts over almost a decade in the business—is better than most.

> "And of course, none of the kids have acne, weight problems, or trouble getting a date for homecoming...So we considered a game where you could role-play high school—do you want to be the "big man on campus," or the quiet bookish type who's writing a novel on the side and attracts the sensitive girls?"

Even though the opportunities to develop original game concepts are rare, we do come up with many possibilities. For our current game, we started coming up with concepts about halfway through the development of our last game (*Tropico*). What follows are the ideas that didn't make the cut.

zoo tycoon: Yes, I know, Microsoft just released a game called *Zoo Tycoon*. Still, we had the idea for essentially the same game about six months before Microsoft announced their game. As soon as another PopTop employee suggested it, I was completely psyched about the concept. Everyone loves animals and zoos, and the possibilities for animal interactions were great. I thought the game would be a blast to develop and a surefire hit. Even though we never got a chance to develop this one, I was right about it being a hit. Despite lukewarm reviews [from other publications, not this one –ed], *Zoo Tycoon* has been a smash, locked into the top ten throughout Christmas. Doh! I wish we coulda' done this one...

caterpillar construction: Most men (including me), like to drive big vehicles that make a big mess. That got me thinking about a game where you operate a variety of heavy construction equipment (Bulldozers, Back-Hoes, Wrecking Balls), and dig stuff up and break stuff. Yes, we'd wrap some kind of a plot premise around it, but basically, the main thrill would be driving your bulldozer at full speed into a toll booth, or knocking over condemned buildings with the wrecking ball. Unfortunately, the logical implementation of this concept is an action/driving game on Playstation 2. We're basically PC strategy game developers, and finally decided this concept was too much of a reach for us.

After going through these and a few other concepts that played to the *Rollercoaster Tycoon* mentality, we switched our rip-off thinking to the other recent smash hit, *The Sims*. I think *The Sims* is so successful because it allows middle class suburbanites to play out their social fantasies—having the perfect house, spouse, and family, and to play out some things that aren't possible in real life (walling your mother-in-law into the bathroom, for example). So what other social arena (outside of suburbia) would fit into this mold?

sim high school: Television teaches us that all high school girls are beautiful and popular. High school boys are generally stars of the football team and drive the brand new convertibles they bought saving their newspaper-route money. And of course, none of the kids have acne, weight problems, or trouble getting a date for homecoming. Since the TV version of high school is actually experienced by about 0.01% of all actual kids, a lot of us have some anxiety about our own high school years. So we considered a game where you could role-play high school—do you want to be the "big man on campus," or the quiet bookish type who's writing a novel on the side and attracts the sensitive girls?

Although we liked the concept, the game would logically call for technology focused on interiors (of the high school itself, the local pizza parlor, etc.), with complex character interaction. Unfortunately, we had been developing a new 3D game engine for over a year that focused on large exterior environments, and emphasized vehicles rather than people. We didn't want to get sidetracked for six months or more re-writing much of our game engine, so we struck this idea.

In the end, we settled on a more conventional (and admittedly, derivative) game concept. Still, it's one we're all very excited about, and I think it will make a great game. In the meantime, if any game developer out there wants to make a game where you can wreck things in a big bulldozer, or where you can relive (and improve upon), your high school years, go right ahead. I'll be the first to buy a copy. ●

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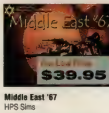

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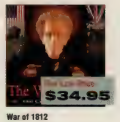

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TOM CHICK

THREE finger salute

the 2001 chicklettes

And the "winners" are...

The ceremony for the 2001 Excrescence in Gaming Awards was going to be hosted by Brain Reynolds, but he cancelled at the last minute because he said he was busy trying to think up the name "Big Huge Games" for his new company. Speaking of which, it was a competitive year for the Worst Name Award. Nominees included utterly generic titles like *Echelon*, *Operation Flashpoint*, *Deadly Zone*, *Elite Force*, and *Hostile Waters*; fake words that meant absolutely nothing like *Oni*, *Kohan*, *Hornuck*, and *Konung*; and amalgams of other words like *Anachronox*, *Nightdark*, *Etherlords*, *Aquanox*, *Strifeshadow*, and *Startopia* (if you believed *Deadly Zone*, *Hornuck*, and *Nightdark* were real games, congratulations: you have a life). But the winner of the Worst Name Award is the misleadingly titled *Civilization III*, which should have been called *Get Ready to Piss Away 100 Hours of Your Life*.

> "This year's biggest surprise was the three way tie for the Time Machine Award, given to companies that try to create a rift in the space/time continuum by packaging old games in new boxes."

This year's biggest surprise was the three way tie for the Time Machine Award, given to companies that try to create a rift in the space/time continuum by packaging old games in new boxes. Take Two's *Merchant Prince II*, Xicat's *F/A-18 Precision Strike Fighter*, and JoWood's *Industry Giant* were the computer gaming equivalent of Jurassic Park, in which dinosaurs were resurrected to bad effect.

The It's About Time Award goes to the concept of game developers as rock stars, which hopefully died when Ion Storm finally closed the doors on its Dallas office and put up a sign bearing the epitaph "Time Made Us His Bitch." Mad props to guys like Sid, Will, and Shigeru, who earned their reputations rather than trying to buy them with VC.

The award for Worst Game about Elves with Flintlocks goes to *Arcanum*, which also happens to be the only game about elves with flintlocks and is therefore also the winner of the award for Best Game about Elves with Flintlocks. *Legends of Might & Magic* wasn't quite eligible because it was a game about elves with laser guns.

The We Thought You Were Dead Award goes to the handful of developers still making excellent flight sims. Those of you who made *Eurofighter Typhoon*, *Fly! 2*, and *Pearl Harbor: Zero Hour* can sit down; we're not talking about you. Developers like Rowan (*Battle of Britain*) and Maddox (*IL-2 Sturmovik*) are the computer gaming equivalent of Japanese soldiers on remote South Pacific islands who haven't been told the war is over and they lost. Who's to say whether it's foolishness or the indomitability of the human spirit? Either way, no one's going to give flight sim fans sympathy for their genre being dead if companies keep turning out gems like these.

The award for Bad Timing would have been won by *Airline Tycoon* and *Air Command*, games about preventing mishaps at airports, but for the stunning upset by *Real War*, Simon & Schuster's supposedly realistic real-time strategy game about the US military going overseas to fight terrorists. Up next from Simon & Schuster is *The New York Police and Fire Department Manpower Shortage Sim*.

The Cognitive Dissonance Award goes to *Red Faction* in which you shoot guards and try to not to think about them lisping, "I decided I have gray eyes." *Summoner* was a runner up for its demons who aren't asking where the Cheetos are.

The Your Name Doesn't Have the Cachet It Used To Have Award goes to Peter Molyneux, whose *Black & White* was fun for the first fifteen minutes. Those of us who played it for at least sixteen minutes won't be so quick to buy the next slap and tickle sim with Mr. Molyneux's name above the title. *Age of Sail II* failed to win this year's Watersports Award, which instead went to the *Hot Date* expansion for *The Sims*, which allows players to combine urinating and romance in the same game.

The Nice Idea, Shame about the Game Award was fiercely contested this year, with a strong showing from *World War II Online*, *Silent Hunter II*, and *Aquanox*, titles that sounded good but don't quite work out once the ones and zeroes hit the hard drive. Playing these highly anticipated games was like going to New York and scoring tickets to *The Producers*, only to show up and find you're there on the night Jonathan Silverman and Normal Fell are standing in.

And finally, the award for Worst Ending went to this column, which simply ended with the word "word."●

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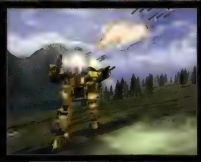
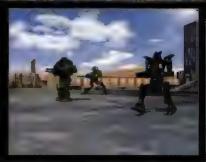
Sweet.





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